

OVER THE QUICKSANDS

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ANNA CHAPIN RAY

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"HE PAUSED AND STOOD THERE LOOKING DOWN UPON HER."
[Frontispiece. See p. 206]

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BY

ANNA CHAPIN RAY

AUTHOR OF "THE BRIDGE BUILDERS," "QUICKSAND," "HEARTY
AND CREED," "BY THE GOOD SAINTS ANGEL," ETC.

FRONTPIECE BY

HARRIET ROOSEVELT RICHARDS

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TORONTO
THE MUSSON BOOK COMPANY
LIMITED



MISS MARY ANN BROWN, 1880. (From the collection of the U.S. National Museum, Washington, D.C.)

OVER THE QUICKSANDS

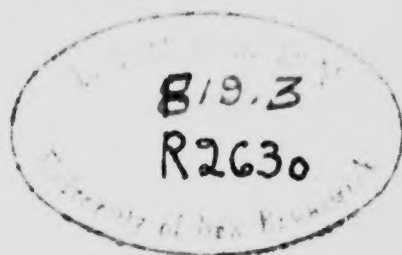
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CHAPTER ONE

DONALD RHODES looked up incredulously.

"Then you forbid my going?" he asked.

Stuart Rhodes hesitated. His son was quite too old to be forbidden. Besides, forbidding only courts curiosity. The hesitation lengthened into a marked pause, before he spoke. Then, —

"Not at all." he said a little hastily. "I merely advise."

"But why?"

"You would n't care for the place."

"People do."

"Some people, the three-day tourist kind. They are n't your sort."

"It is n't the place I expect to care about; it's the crowd that's going up," Don argued lazily. "Mrs. Van Schaik always gets together a lot of pretty girls. She has asked about a dozen of us in all, and —"

"How long do you expect to stay?"

"Expect! When you're dead set against my going up at all! That's you all over, Dad. You kick against the pricks with one foot, and trample them down with the other."

His father laughed indulgently. In fact, Stuart Rhodes usually did end most similar arguments by

laughing at and with this easy-going youngster, son of his old age.

"That 's a nice, athletic metaphor to be applying to your old dad," he objected.

"True, though." Don sauntered to the window, as he spoke, and stood there looking out at the rain-lashed leaves of the calladiums which edged the terrace beneath. Suddenly he faced about. "Dad, what is the reason you don't want me to take this trip?" he demanded.

For one instant, the air of the room seemed charged with electricity, as if a storm might break at any moment. Don stood looking at his father; his father sat looking at his own finger nails. Then he looked up to meet the steadfast eyes of his son.

"I only thought you would n't care about it, Don," he said, with palpable mendacity.

"Care? But I do. I like the crowd; I've never seen the place. Naturally I care. Still," his dark blue eyes searched his father's face; "you don't like the notion, Dad; any fellow can see that. Moreover, it is n't like you to object to things without a reason. Then what is the reason? Do you need me in the office, the next week or two?"

The older man's eyes fell back and rested once more on his finger nails. It was not easy to meet this intrepid frankness of his son, this keen appreciation of his own mental habits, with any hint of reservation. And yet, Stuart Rhodes felt that there was urgent need for reservation in their present talk.

"N — no," he admitted, after a moment's pause.

An instant later, he regretted the admission, wrung from him as it was by the law that truth must needs

bring forth truth in return. Don had caught the answer. Facing back to the window to watch the round little drops chase one another down the swinging leaves, he was arguing out the rest of the situation from what data he had in hand.

"You can't be objecting to the crowd, you know," he remarked at the storm outside. "You were the one that introduced me to Mrs. Van, in the first place; and all the people that are going up are on mother's invitation list. You say you don't want me, here in the office. Really, Dad," he spun about again and laughed down into his father's face; "I can't say that I wonder, for I'm not exactly a Napoleon of finance, even after a year of training. However, time may mend that matter. But, granted the people and the vacation are all right, you must be hating the place itself."

"I — don't hate it, Don."

"You've been there?"

"— Yes."

"What's it like?" Don sauntered across the room and flung himself into a chair. "They say it is confoundedly quaint and all the rest of it."

"So it is," his father assented shortly.

Don laughed

"So that's the trouble, Dad?" he queried, while he flicked a bit of lint from his sleeve. "You always were a modern of the moderns, and I suppose there's rather too much of the dead past buried there to suit your notions of propriety."

The keen brown eyes beneath the bushy white brows seemed leaping from the face of Stuart Rhodes, and the lips below them stiffened. Otherwise, the man sat motionless, expressionless, regardless of the intended

flippancy of his son's remark. When at length he spoke, his voice was quiet, wholly unconcerned.

"When are you starting, Don?"

Don laughed, in a perfect good fellowship quite undisturbed by his father's whims.

"When you withdraw your objections, Dad."

"I don't object at all. I was only a little surprised at your caring to go up there, at this season."

"Go? I'll go anywhere, so long as the girls are pretty, and the rails will carry a private car." Don laughed again, this time at his own confession of vagrancy. "Sure you don't need me, Dad?"

The older man bent forward for a match, took a cigar from his pocket and then scratched the match. The head flew off. A second match broke under his fingers; but a third one kindled the cigar. Then, while the smoke floated around him, veiling somewhat the keenness of his eyes, he spoke again.

"I can get on without you, Don. Of course, I always miss the having you about the office; but I can't say that business will stop, with your going out of town. Go on, and have your fun. Mrs. Van is a good hostess and a clever woman; and the old city really is worth the seeing, in spite of the babble of the cheap tourists."

"You've known it, then?"

"Yes, after a fashion."

"Long?"

"— Yes."

Don felt in his pockets for cigarette case and match-box. With him, one match was quite enough.

"Queer!" he commented then, with careless unconcern. "I never heard you say anything about it."

His father, smoking silently, silently regarded him.

Seen thus, face to face, there was a curious likeness between the two men. Don was handsome, in an unexpected, contradictory sort of way. Beneath their thin, arched brows, his eyes were blue, deep-set and singularly direct; his mouth was a Cupid's bow set on an iron jaw; his hair was brown and very fine, and only judicious cropping kept down its tendency to wave. His father was handsome, too; at least, he had been, until time — or life — had muddled his features. His eyes were as keen as ever. His bushy white head rested proudly on his shoulders; but the modelling of the chin was weak, his nose was bulbous, and his lower lip hung slightly open. They were curiously alike, were the father and son; and yet one felt instinctively, looking at them, that the likeness was that of youth, not age. Stuart Rhodes in his early manhood might easily have resembled his son. Donald Rhodes, with the passing of the years, would never be exactly like his father. There were other strains in his inheritance, latent as yet, which were by far too potent to admit of that.

Like as they were, albeit so unlike, the affection between them was indubitable. It showed now in the long silence which lay between them, as they sat, and smoked, and gazed into each other's eyes. The father's eyes, by right of his seniority, held somewhat of reservation; but Don's small, deep-set blue eyes met them unreservedly, and with a frank devotion which was unspoken only because it was too deep for boyish words. For, despite his four and twenty years, Donald Rhodes was still very much a boy, looking on life quite simply, as something designed for his own particular amusement and behest.

When the older man spoke, it was with a complete flinging away of his former manner of veiled disapproval.

"When is Mrs. Van starting?"

"The fourth."

"Next Tuesday? It's a good season for the trip. The foliage will be at its best, I should think, and you'll have the full moon."

Don tossed away the end of his cigarette and lighted another.

"That never counts for much in town," he remarked.

"It depends somewhat on the town. Up there, it does. How long does she expect to stay?"

"Four days. Up there, that is. It takes a day, each way, to go and come."

"Only four days? That's not so very long." But the voice of Stuart Rhodes showed that the time limit was not displeasing to him.

"Long enough to see the sights, and to get heartily sick of each other, in case we happen on a rainy season." Don's laugh was more optimistic than were his words. "I've seen the time when two days were quite enough."

His father nodded whimsically.

"Storms do strike in now and then; I've experienced the like, myself. Moreover, an atmospheric shower sometimes turns into a psychological tornado that tears things pretty well to bits. Still, Mrs. Van can generally be counted on to steer for any fair weather that is brewing, so I don't worry. A woman with her complexion never goes in for emotional dust storms; she's too much afraid of the resultant wrinkles."

Don's lips curved into the smile which he customarily accorded to his father's philosophy.

"You speak as one with authority, Dad," he observed, between puffs at his fast-vanishing cigarette.

The older man filled his lungs with smoke, blew it out again and watched it with smiling eyes.

"Why not? I've known women in my time, known them well, Don." His voice was full of supreme content; but his face, for the instant, had lost all likeness to his son who, busy with his ash, was quite unconscious of the curious alteration in his father's look and manner.

When the older man spoke once more, the smile had left his eyes, and his voice was quite matter-of-fact and full of business.

"You'll be away till about the eleventh, then? Your mother will be in Lenox, by that time, I suppose. She does n't want to go back to town till late, this year. You might stop off there, coming down."

"And leave the others?" Don's voice showed that the suggestion was not pleasant to him.

"Just as you like. I only offered a way of escape, in case you cared to try it. Still, it's better manners to hang together till you're back in town. By the way, who are the ones to go?"

"The inevitable set. There never seems to be much latitude of choice: the Van Ostade girls, Eva Pope, Louise Filliter, Bertie Harrison, a Ross or two — one is always sure of some of them — and that new Englishman, Locke. In fact, I think the party is made up in his honour."

"Likely. Mrs. Van has an appetite for exotic flavours, and Locke is like nothing else that Manhattan has seen in years. And you and Mrs. Van complete the number, I suppose."

Don cast away his cigarette and rose to his feet, token that, for him, the matter was settled

"Yes, with Billy Welch and Hilda."

"Hilda!" The older man sat up straight and spoke with sudden sharpness.

Don, crossing the floor, halted in surprise at the new accent in his father's tone.

"Yes, Hilda, of course," he answered. "Mrs. Van always counts her into anything that's doing. They're thick as thieves. Moreover," his voice broke into its wonted laugh; "where Hilda is, Billy is sure to be. If zeal and a pug-dog's devotion can accomplish it, he's bound to be my cousin before the season ends." And, still laughing at his own prediction, Don sauntered along, and out of the room.

Left to himself, Stuart Rhodes sat motionless, erect, his eyes staring at the wall before him, his cheeks changing slowly from their customary red suffusion to a mottled, dusky gray. Then his lower lip trembled a little.

"Hilda!" he said to himself, quite low.

The sound of his own voice seemed to arouse him from his trance. The red surged back across his cheeks, darkened and dyed the roots of his bushy white hair, while his brown eyes blazed with sudden determination.

"Hilda!" he repeated, still aloud. "My God, no! Not while I am here to prevent it!" And the table jarred under the weight of his falling palm.

Don, meanwhile, had gone in search of Hilda. Indeed, it was the unvarying custom of Donald Rhodes, whenever he was bored, or worried, or perplexed, to go in search of Hilda, the cousin who, since his little childhood, had shared his home and his experiences of life. Sisterless, he yet had never felt the lack of a sister. He

could never think back to a time when there had not been a Hilda within reach, gay, fearless, indomitable and a bit tempestuous, ready to share his triumphs and his worries and his woes, bringing to bear upon them the wisdom gained by her two-years longer knowledge of life and its inherent problems. From the first, it had seemed to Don the most natural thing in the world to talk matters over with Hilda, far more natural than to discuss them with his mother who, chronically depressed and totally adoring, took all life's problems, her own and his, so exceedingly to heart. Mrs. Rhodes always argued all things out into a problem. Hilda glanced them over, bundled them up and cast them aside with a little laugh. And Don was still at the epoch of his life where he regarded a laugh as the best possible sauce for all things, himself included; although now and then it took all of Hilda's wit to make him see the humour of himself. In the end, however, they usually accomplished it between them, and this common fund of merriment, together with the mutual understanding it created, added not a little to the strengthening of the bond between them. Without Hilda, Don's existence would have missed the sharpening that gave it point.

Just now, Don's need for Hilda seemed to him most urgent. His interview with his father, unlike any he had ever known before, had filled his mind with questions, unasked, unaskable. Why had his father been so opposed to his short trip? Of the latent opposition, Don could feel no manner of doubt, veiled though it had been and sturdily denied. And his father, up to that hour, had never opposed him in anything whatsoever. What was the barrier now? Why was his

father anxious to cover the fact of its existence, instead of speaking out frankly and making its nature known? And why —? And why —?

In face of all these questions, Don wanted Hilda, wanted her at once and acutely. Not that Hilda could answer them. Nobody could do that, unless, perhaps, his father. Nevertheless, he himself could sort out and clarify his own impressions by pouring them out before Hilda's mental gaze, by looking them over again, viewed in the light of her feminine intuitions. Don was logical, to the last twisty convolution of his brain. Nevertheless, he was accustomed to flounder heavily along in Hilda's wake, as she went leaping from one conclusion to another. He wanted Hilda; but Hilda, regardless of the weather, had gone off for a ride.

She came in at noon, rosy, breathless, her hair and habit dripping with the rain. By the time she emerged from her own room, luncheon was on the table, and Don had an engagement which was taking him in town, directly after luncheon.

He came back, late for tea; and Hilda met him on the stairs. Early as it was, she was already dressed for dinner, and her eyes were sparkling, as she caught her cousin's hand.

"Oh, Don! Such news!" she burst out excitedly, before he had a chance to speak. "Where have you been, all afternoon? I could n't wait to tell you. We're sailing, Saturday, Uncle Stuart and I, to be gone six weeks. He is taking me across to London, to get my winter things."

And Don, caught in the whirl of her excitement, accepted the fact for what it was, without pausing to connect it with the subject of that morning's talk.

CHAPTER TWO

"WHAT'S the matter with Tremaine, anyhow?" Gerrans inquired, with some impatience.

Allison Carhart glanced up from the embroidery with which she invariably fortified herself between the arrival of the first guest and the coming of the tea. Most of all, she flaunted it in the eyes of Gervase Gerrans who, months on months before, had dubbed it her bore-protector.

"It's those yellow eyes of his," she explained concisely. "They are bound to make him take a jaundiced view of life."

Gerrans nodded.

"Then, according to that theory, you ought to be a victim of acute melancholia," he observed, as he stared straight into Allison's dark blue eyes.

She met his stare without the slightest trace of self-consciousness. Then she laughed, and her laugh was death to any sentiment.

"That's a back-handed thing to say, Gerry. Moreover, if I allowed subjective talk in this room, I should remind you that I'm an exception to every rule."

"You're a living reminder of that fact," Gerrans assented promptly. "I've done my best to rule you, ever since you wore pigtails and a pinafore, and you've

always taken exception to everything I have tried to make you do. But Tremaine — ”

Allison took five stitches, frowned in thoughtful contemplation of her work, and took out three of the stitches which she had but just set.

“Well?” she said then.

“I was merely waiting until you came back to social consciousness,” Gerrans informed her tranquilly. “Some day, I trust, that beastly piece of cloth will be so full of stitch-marks that you can’t put in another one. Then perhaps you will pay some sort of attention to my talk.”

“If I did, you would straightway become too ponderous. A man always begins to prose, directly he gets the whole floor. That’s why I unsew this work almost as fast as I sew it up.”

“What is?”

This time, Allison’s face betrayed that her failure to follow her guest’s thought was not wholly a matter of her own volition.

“Is what?”

“Is why?” Gerrans laughed. “Is that too runic for you, Allie? I mean — ”

“No matter,” she interrupted hastily. “You mean well, Gerry. No one ever denies that; and, after all, that is the main essential. Every new person who comes into Quebec starts off on his social career by alluding to you as ‘that well-meaning young Mr. Gerrans.’”

Gerrans made a grimace of disgust.

“Heaven defend me from the charge! But we were talking about Tremaine.”

“You were,” Allison observed pointedly, as she set another stitch.

"When you interrupted," Gerrans made deliberate explanation. "I was about to remark just then that Tremaine is rather a man of mystery."

"With two capital M's?" Allison queried. "It sounds nice, Gerry, sounds very sensational; but don't let your newspaper imagination run away with you too far. We've known Bernon almost ever since he was a little baby."

"I have. You're too young. But what of that? The mystery existed even then. As a rule, a child has some sort of —"

Allison lifted her head with a jerk.

"Hush!" she said suddenly. Then, rising, she moved a step or two towards the door, smiling and holding out her hands in cordial welcome. "Bernon! Are you really here at last? I could n't believe my ears, when you telephoned me you were back in town; and I could hardly wait to see you. I summoned Gerry to the revel, and I have told Marie that I'm not at home to anybody else. How glad we are to see you!"

Few men could stand aloof from such a welcome as that, a welcome told out by voice and face and hand-clasp, as well as by the spoken words. For a minute, the new-comer gave himself up completely to the pleasure of it; then, reluctantly dropping Allison's strong little hand, he turned to Gerrans and shut his brown fingers about the other's fist with a cordial, hearty strength which caused Gerrans to wince.

"Confound you, Tremaine!" he objected. "You've the muscle of a blacksmith. You'll lay us all out, if you go on as you've begun. Still, as Allie says, I'm glad to see you, glad enough, almost, to atone for the attendant anguish of your greeting."

He looked it, indeed, did Gerrans, as he stood there, nursing his aching hand caressingly and laughing down into the face of his old friend. Instinctively, one felt that Gervase Gerrans was created to laugh. Involuntarily, one laughed with him; his mirth was too infectious to be neglected. For the rest, he was tall and slim and well-groomed. He rarely was out of temper, never was in a hurry, never was jarred from his tranquil enjoyment of things in general. He had more than a dash of Irish blood in his veins, and certain of the resultant racial traits had led Allison Carhart to name him the universal lover.

Not that his lover-like propensities had ever caused any havoc in the heart of Allison, however. She had known him too long for that, too long and far too well. The Carharts and the Gerranses had lived side by side for three generations now; for three generations, they had been unvaryingly good friends. Allison's first tentative walks abroad had been less often with her nurse than with her six-year-old protector, next door. To him she owed her first small sliding lessons, lessons which had been accomplished by way of the heaps of snow in Hamel Street behind the Hôtel-Dieu wall. Hand in hand with him, she had made her first perilous circuit of the skating rink; with his red-tuqued head tucked under her elbow and his arm shut about the bundle of wool that marked the spot where, later on, her waist would be, she had known the thrill of her first dropping swoop over the edge of the Falls slides.

In turn, she had read him infant lectures, while she had alternately plastered up the bruises and sewed up the tatters which, they both feared, would lead to domestic rebuke and consequent imprisonment for her

doughty knight and comrade. The surgery was as crude as were the stitches; but Mrs. Gerrans only laughed softly, as she saw them both. Their manifest good will, the seriousness of their intention atoned, in her eyes, for all their eccentricities; and neither Gervase nor Allison ever realized the tact with which she renewed plasters of more than dubious extraction, and ripped out darns which, to say the very least, were of the impressionistic school of art.

And so the days and the years wore on, through all the stages of kindergarten and dame school and high school, until, when Gerrans was eighteen, Allison Carhart waked up, one morning, to find that her world had come to an end; that, Gervase gone away to college, there was nothing left for her to do. She had vaguely been aware that the day was coming for his departure, had vaguely realized that she would be lonely without him. Still, at fourteen, future sorrows make rather a slight impression; even the sight of the open trunk and the heaps of primly piled clothing waiting to go inside it, even the pink nose and heavy eyes of Mrs. Gerrans had been quite forgotten, when Gervase had proposed a farewell treat of sawlogs. The brown and sticky delicacy had absorbed Allison's mind completely; and the girl had had absolutely no comprehension of the cause of her companion's unwonted lack of appetite.

Gervase had taken the midnight train. Allison's farewells to him, at early bedtime, had been clogged by a lump of sticky sweetness in her mouth which, for the time being, had made her quite oblivious of that other lump within her throat. She went to bed and to sleep, wrapped in the unconcern of healthy fourteen. She

waked, next morning, to a sudden realization that the full half of each of her good times had been lopped away. Who would walk to school with her and carry her books? Who would — everything? At the comprehensive and unanswerable question, her unconcern fled from her. She buried her head in the blankets and burst into a lusty roar of woe which brought her mother flying to the scene, but not, however, to the rescue. No rescue, in fact, was possible. Gervase had gone away, gone absolutely, gone permanently; for, in the mind of fourteen, four years, albeit dotted with occasional vacations, can constitute permanence.

As a matter of fact, it was six years before Gerrans finally returned to settle down again in the city of his birth. His four years at McGill had been followed by two more years in Europe, years mainly spent in England, absorbing the best of its traditions, learning, by study of the past, how best to estimate the present. From his little childhood, the boy had always shown a keen interest in current happenings; his college course had brought to light a facile use of ink. By the beginning of his junior year, it had become an accepted fact that Gerry Gerrans was going in for journalism. Out of regard for the feelings of an adoring mother, he went in for it at home. Moreover, he went in for it with enthusiasm and skill, albeit with a total failure to take himself and his talents in proper earnest. When he felt like working, he worked brilliantly. When he ceased to feel like it, he also ceased to work. However, it should be distinctly stated and understood that he spent his playtime according to the best traditions of his blood. He flirted more or less with every presentable girl in the province; he was officially connected with

every kind of club, social, military, or sporting. He did it all, though, after the fashion of an honest gentleman; and then he went home and told Allison all about it, in detail and prolixly.

And Allison Carhart was that rare type of woman who preferred the honest chumship of such a man as Gerrans to any quantity of sentimental adulation.

Allison, meanwhile, had spent the time of Gerrans's absence in growing towards a singularly all-round type of maturity. Like him, an adored only child, she had had leisure and ample opportunity to cultivate herself in all the graces, save the too dubious one of self-analysis. She read a few things besides novels, including even a daily paper; by a process of unconscious absorption, she learned from her mother certain of the old-fashioned womanly accomplishments of hand and needle and of mixing-bowl, and she balanced these sturdier talents by a positive genius for the out-door sports in which her city takes such infinite delight. Canoeing and hockey, dancing and skiing; she did them all by turns. She could make more than an occasional bull's eye at her rifle practice: she could steer her own toboggan, even when the icy crust gleamed thick and white upon the Cove Fields. Her muscles were as hard as those of any growing boy; her heart was as soft as that of any woman. She revelled in the things of life, all day, and she slept the sleep of the just, all night. Her complexion was as perfect as was her lack of all self-consciousness.

Of course, a girl like that was bound to have admirers, many of them. Gerrans had discovered that fact, on his return to Quebec, four years earlier. He also had discovered a good round dozen of the admirers themselves lined up before Allison, each waiting for his turn

to do with her the one thing in which he most excelled. For a week, Gerrans sat back and looked on, according to the line of admirers the benign attention which an elderly Saint Bernard might bestow upon a basket of squirming puppies. Then gently but firmly he pushed them to one side and took up his old relation with Allison Carhart. Allison was nothing loath. The admirers were amusing, but callow. Moreover, their friendship lacked all perspective. With Gerrans, she could become reminiscent, without being accused of seeking sentimental answer to her reminiscences. And still moreover, Allison had found it hard, among so many of the admirers, to remember just which one did what; and, in consequence, there had been various mischances, annoying to the admirers, but vastly amusing to Allison herself. Gerrans, on the other hand, did all things in turn; and, furthermore, he did them well. It was very restful to drop back into the old, unsentimental friendship, to feel the old reliance on his judgment, the old protecting care that lapped her round.

In time, of course, the admirers came back again, bringing in their train a number of brand-new recruits. There was nothing to be wondered at in this. Even apart from questions of social prestige, Allison was an attractive girl; while, as the months ran on, Gerrans apparently was absorbing himself in other directions. Unhappily, however, the admirers had no notion how all the other directions led back again to Allison; how Allison herself, though not in the least in love with her old comrade, was yet developing a progressive tendency to measure all other men by the stature of Gervase Gerrans.

The sole exception to that rule lay in the man who

now was just seating himself on top of her abandoned sewing. Allison Carhart never had sought to measure Bernon Tremaine by Gervase Gerrans, partly because he too went far enough into her past to make such measures needless, partly because it was manifest, even to the superficial glance of an entire stranger, that the two men possessed not one single attribute in common, owned not one single trait of character which could serve as unit for a common measure. They both were able-bodied men, both were her well-tried friends. There all likeness ended, broken off short, like the fallen bridge up on the river bank, at the first steps to its approach.

Lack of measure, however, by no means signifies lack of welcome. Allison's tone was hearty, as she plied her guest with questions which sought to cover past experience and future plans within the space of half a minute.

"You are really through, on the south shore?"

"Yes."

"And you found it man-work, in spite of the way you dreaded it?"

Tremaine laughed, and the laugh changed his face to a startling degree. At rest, it was a stern face, expressionless, almost a little sullen. Lighting, it was singularly human, likable.

"I brought in a couple of books of photographs," he told her.

"Bring them with you, to-morrow," she ordered briefly. "I'll be in, all the morning, and we'll go over them together. I want to see what you've been doing. How long can you be in town, anyway?"

"Indefinitely." The stretching out of his legs and then the throwing his right leg across his other knee

seemed to add emphasis to the contentment in his voice.

Allison nodded assent to the maid who was halting, the tray in her hands, upon the threshold. Then, —

“How long is that?” she queried. “It’s no use to get up any expectations, though. Just as Gerry and I think we can count on you for something, you go frisking off to some fresh wilderness, and become a mere embodied postage stamp, for all the social good we get out of you.”

“You’ll get it, this time,” Tremaine replied, as he took his cup. “By Jove, Allison, it’s a treat to taste your tea once more.”

“How long do you really expect to stay, Tremaine?” Gerrans asked, while he looked critically at the toast, and finally made up his mind to begin with buns, after the fashion of his vanished youth.

“Indefinitely, I tell you. I’m going into office work, for a change.”

“Here?”

“Yes. At least, on Mountain Hill. There is n’t room here for a draughting table.” Tremaine glanced whimsically around the well-ordered room. Then he drew another, deeper breath of sheer content. “It’s good to get back to town again, after the wilderness,” he said simply.

Allison answered just as simply, —

“And it’s good to have you back here, Bernon. We always miss you, nowadays. You used to be as inevitable a circumstance as tea and toast, and it never seems quite right, the knowing you are out in camp and at work, while we go frivolling along here in just the same

old way. Do you truly, honestly mean that you are to stay in town, all winter long?"

"It looks so now." Tremaine took more toast, and more tea. "They needed a man to hold the office open; it's long hours, and a fairly long salary, and no one else seemed anxious to take it up. Of course, these chaps who come out from England and have n't any local ties would rather be out at the front. The work is no harder; they live well, and it sounds a good deal more glorious. Still, knowing all sides of the thing, I am willing to give up the glory, and have a few months of civilization. It won't be bad to try, unless —" He paused suddenly, waved aside the buns and put down his cup with a little clatter of the spoon.

Allison, just ready to pass the buns to Gerrans, changed her mind for no apparent reason, and set them down, instead. Then she raised her blue eyes to Tremaine's face, in silent question. Long since, she had grown accustomed to the unexpected alternations in Tremaine's moods, to the abrupt eclipsing of the friendly light in his eyes, small eyes and amber-brown and a bit short-sighted. Their short-sightedness went far towards creating the impression that, now and then, Bernon Tremaine retreated to an invisible world shut up inside himself.

Now Allison waited for him to speak again. Experience had taught her that it was best to leave Tremaine to work his own way out again. Not so Gerrans, however. Experience never taught him anything he did not choose to learn. In consequence, of all Tremaine's old friends, he was the only one to whom Tremaine's moods apparently counted nothing. He collided with them often, sometimes he came out smarting from the con-

tact; but he never quite reached the point of deciding to shun them in the future. As consequence, Tremaine adored Gerrans absolutely. It made him feel more normal to be met with this cheery disregard of possible emotional consequences; and normalness, a colourless conventionality, was the one thing that Bernon Tremaine most coveted. In that, at least, he was wholly normal. The gifts of the gods are never one half so valuable as are their withholdings.

Deliberately, then, Gerrans picked out a third and buttery bun. Deliberately he turned to Tremaine.

"Unless, man?" he inquired encouragingly.

The last vestige of expression vanished from Tremaine's face. Rising, he sauntered to the front window of the drawing-room and stood there, looking down across the garden of the Hôtel-Dieu where a trio of nuns knelt on the dry brown soil, their fingers busy with a few belated tufts of greenery. When at last he spoke, his words came with a curious detachment which took from them every trace of personality.

"I have n't so many points of contact, you know, Gerry," he said slowly, still with his eyes upon the kneeling, black-veiled nuns. "There would be nothing to be wondered at, if I came back to find them rather blunted, after the months I've been away. It's not as if," he smiled a little mirthlessly; "I had an adoring mother such as yours, to keep my place warm for me, while I'm out of it. However —"

His eyes still on the kneeling figures of the women who, of their own free will, had severed every point of human contact, he fell silent, his fists in his pockets, his brow a little lowering. The silence lasted while Gerrans, who never had wholly outgrown his boyish appetite, at-

tacked and finished yet another bun. Then, as abruptly as it had fallen upon him, Tremaine cast his mood aside.

"Never mind the contact question," he said carelessly, as once more he threw himself down in the chair he had abandoned. "What I need now is social information. Allison, will you and Gerry kindly proceed to instruct me in all the latest combinations and fads and happenings? Remember that it is precisely fourteen months since I've laid eyes upon my evening clothes." And, under his determined leadership, the talk drifted away into a discussion of the season's social promise.

CHAPTER THREE

"GERRY!" It was Allison's voice that came softly in over the telephone, that same evening. "Mother is lying down; she has headache. I'm lonesome, and, as long as I know you have n't anything especial happening, to-night, I do wish you would come in here for a while, and help me discuss —" The voice seemed slowly withdrawing itself from the vicinity of the receiver.

"Well? Are you there? Discuss what?"

"Bernon, of course. What else is worth discussion?"

And Gerrans obediently sought his hat.

"But, really, did n't you think —"

Allison's unfinished question marked the extreme limit of their progress, after an hour of what she had been pleased to term discussion. The fact of the matter was, however, that the so-called discussion was really a monologue on her part, an amused attention on the part of Gerrans. Years since, he had learned to ignore the corners of Tremaine's mental anatomy, had also learned that these same corners were singularly important in the eyes of Allison Carhart. Now, after an hour of considering the subject, he judged it high time to break away from it and face certain more practical affairs depending upon that same matter.

"Think nothing, Allie! I told you the truth, when I

said Tremaine was more or less a mystery. As far as we know him, he's a good sort. What's the use of turning an X-ray machine on the parts of him we don't understand? Let the fellow have his reservations and his secrets. If he wants to hug them and lug them around in his arms, it's a long way more trouble to him than it is to us. When he wants to tell us about them, let him. Till then, hands off."

"Yes," Allison protested. "Only it seems as if we might —"

"Well?" Gerrans observed, in polite encouragement.

"Help the matter on, somehow."

His politeness cast aside, Gerrans settled back in his chair and laughed till Mrs. Carhart, above stairs, muffled her aching head beneath the blankets.

"Oh, go to thunder with your help, Allie! The fellow does n't want assistance from any of us now. When he does, he'll proceed to yelp. We men all do. Meanwhile, what is it about Tremaine that draws forth all your sentimental yearnings? You don't go on like this about my need for help and comprehension in my secrets."

Long years of association with Gerrans had taught Allison Carhart how to accept ridicule. She accepted it now with her usual good temper.

"You've not a secret to your name, Gerry. You're as leaky as a sieve, and you have just about as much temperamental oversoul as a gopher. It was a great waste of time to expect you to understand Bernon's finer nature. Let's pass on to his social environment. After a year and a half in camp, how do you suppose he ever is going to fit in?"

"That's easy," Gerrans predicted confidently. "I'll

oversee his choice of haberdashery, and, once his clothes are pressed, you 'll find he 'll be all right."

"I 'm not too sure. People always did rather like him, and, of course, he does all the proper things. The only trouble with him is that he thinks too hard, while he is doing them, and, worse, he babbles forth all the results of his thinkings. We girls don't want a man to discuss theology over his shoulder to the next girl in line at a skating carnival; and we really hate to be fed on a medley of roadbed grades and sociological ones, while we 're climbing to the top of the big slide. Gerry, I love Bernon, love him fondly; but, between you and me, I feel as if he were going to be a bit of a whale upon our hands."

The whale, meanwhile, was settling his possessions in his long-abandoned room, and preparing to take his place once more in the town life awaiting him. Glad as he was to get back to town once more, to be thrown in close contact with these two best friends of his, to take up and knot together the fraying ends of many broken interests, he yet shrank a little from the winter opening out before him. After the open-air life in the bush, a life whose hours had been dictated solely by the advantages of his work, the life in town loomed before him, unduly organized, a bit relentless. In it, one must be wholly of it; there was no appeal from its incessant demands upon him. Tremaine liked the things it did; but not the way it did them. Events followed each other in too feverish succession. Society demanded of him that he should take it all, or have nothing; it was not for him to pick and choose, not even though his choice would have been dictated, not by the things themselves, but by the crying need of his

nature to have a little time to go apart by itself, to consider its own progress, its own aspiration, its own necessities.

From his little childhood, this need had lain heavily, insistently upon Bernon Tremaine. His good days and his bad half-hours had been alike in one respect: to gain their full significance, they must be argued over with himself, grasped in their entirety. For that, leisure was needed and solitude. No matter how long he ignored the demands of his nature, in time he must yield to them, and to the full. His months in camp, then, had been to him an almost priceless boon, allowing, as they did, the leisure to catch up on the balancing of his spiritual accounts. Now, of set purpose, he had come back again into the world to claim his place among his social kind. Engineering, punctuated with long hours of self-communion, was far more stimulating than many cups of sugary tea; but Tremaine suspected that, for him, it was far less healthful. Accordingly, he had made application for the vacant office opening in town.

Of course, being young and human and as healthy as an ox, he liked the teas and the attendant fuss bound to be made over any presentable addition to the younger set. He enjoyed the prospective change from the official association with his inferiors to daily contact with other men of hereditary brains and breeding. Most of all he liked girls, the more and the prettier, the better. He liked girl talk, too, although, in answer, he poured out upon them the resultant mass of opinion brewed by his lonely meditations beside his campfire in the bush. The girls gasped, smiled vacantly, and changed the subject with all possible speed; yet something in Tremaine's enigmatic personality made them count it privilege to

accept his invitations, next time they came their way. Not a girl in all the younger set failed to measure her own social significance by the number of times she had aroused a spark of interested comprehension in Bernon Tremaine's amber eyes.

That Bernon Tremaine was an enigma, no one in Quebec sought to deny. His history deserved the word quite as much as did his personality. Just a quarter of a century before, Bernon Tremaine had made his advent in Quebec, accompanied by a nurse, a bank account and two trunks filled with superlatively good clothes. The nurse was French; she spoke no English whatsoever. The child talked a curious jargon of the two languages; but, from the start, the nurse saw to it that his new affiliations should be wholly English. They boarded in an English family; he went to an English kindergarten and, when he was old enough, he worshipped his Creator by way of the English Cathedral. To those persons who could understand her, the nurse told the child's history, frankly and with much detail. The father was a ranch owner from far beyond Winnipeg. The mother was child of a well-known Toronto home; she had been totally disinherited for marrying a man whose social rank was far beneath her own, whatever might have been his wealth and his innate good qualities. She had gone with him to the far Northwest, where her health had failed by reason of the climate. The inevitable wandering in search of cure had followed, had ended with the mother's death, unavoidable, yet hastened by the shock of seeing her husband crushed beneath a moving train. Two years later, it had been arranged by their lawyers that the child should be brought to Quebec, and left there for his education, an

isolated little human fact, ignored by his kin and only linked to the invisible past by the person of his faithful nurse.

And then, all at once, that link had snapped. Four years after his coming to Quebec, the child had waked, one morning, to discover his nurse vanished, her bed unruffled, her trunks and boxes left behind, orderly, their contents quite intact.

For a week, the disappearance assumed all the prominence of a newspaper mystery. Theories were put forth and disproved, in the largest possible types. Then a new sensation burst upon the community. The missing nurse was relegated from the first page to the fifth; and, since it was a season of unusually heavy snows, the community settled down to a belief that the woman had gone out for an evening walk after her charge was in bed, that, in some way, she had strayed from the beaten road and had become buried in the drifts, only to come to light with the thawing in the spring. By spring, as far as the general public was concerned, the case of the nurse was totally forgotten.

The English family, meanwhile, was of a practical turn of mind. They launched detectives on the track of the missing nurse; but, when the detectives came back again, confessing themselves foiled, they set about reconstructing the situation on the best basis left to them. First of all, they made inquiries at the bank, and ascertained that an annuity had been established, subject to drawings by the legal guardians of the child. No other guardians appearing, they promptly assumed the responsibility, a responsibility which they fulfilled honourably and with judiciousness. That done, they prudently brought home to the deserted child a succes-

sion of coveted toys, a new one for every day until, by sheer bewilderment of riches, the boy forgot to mourn for his most coveted toy of all, his nurse.

The vanished nurse had been a great constructive artist in her way. During the four years of her living in Quebec, she had contrived to establish the boy's life upon a foundation suitable, desirable, lasting. She had seen to it that his home surroundings in the English family should, in so far as possible, make good the lack in his own kin; that the life around him should be refined, intelligent, as well as friendly to the little orphan. With the same degree of care, she had chosen his first baby school, his companions. Indeed, in looking backward, people marvelled that a woman in exactly her position could have possessed sufficient acumen to start the life entrusted to her care along so safe a trail. All her arrangements for the child betokened not alone her comprehension of his peculiar needs, but also her understanding of the two-raced city; betokened as well, not only her interest for his present, but her thoughtful, prescient care for what was bound to be a lonely future. Had she foreseen the unknown tragedy which caused her end, she could have taken no greater precautions against harm.

All in all, there was no especial reason that Tremaine's life should not have been lonely. His foster family were devoted to him; he won some friends, chief among them Gervase Gerrans and, later, Allison Carhart; he might have won as many more. Nevertheless, the fact remained that all these people were accidental happenings in his life; that, in all the world, there was no one who really belonged to him but himself. He was twelve years old, when that fact first

dawned upon him. From that time, there dated his curious trick of regarding himself as made up of two entities, one of whom was the best possible chum of the other, mutually reliant, mutually in need of each other's understanding and support. From that time, too, dated the boy's need to take himself away from others, every now and then, to leave the babel of his acquaintances and give his two selves stillness and leisure to renew their comprehension of each other. Moreover, certain chapters of his experience, certain mental crises which he faced, as time went on, were known to those two selves alone, the one self going out to contact with his kind, the other living cloistered and apart, the two meeting in a communion perfect and full of satisfaction.

All this, however, Bernon Tremaine kept to himself. One quickly learns to keep one's secrets well in hand, when there is never any one person more than any other to whom one may impart them. To the outward eye, Bernon Tremaine was a matter-of-fact young engineer, rather too clever, but sufficiently well-groomed to neutralize that disconcerting fact. Save for his eyes, he was rather ugly to look upon; but he danced exceedingly well, was a good, all-round athlete, and knew the exact psychological moment to divest himself of his overcoat, when he came inside a house. His social evolution had gone hand in hand with his mental. He plainly had inherited the main essentials. The others, and those the more local ones, he absorbed with apparent unconsciousness of any effort. For the rest, his kindergarten tricks had been performed in a species of duet with Gervase Gerrans who, after their first and inevitable resort to fisticuffs, had waved an olive branch

of peace in the form of an invitation to go to build block houses for Allison Carhart. And Allison Carhart's blue eyes had smiled up at the stranger boy, that day, with just the same welcome which had lasted for fully twenty years.

As a matter of course, Tremaine's town office had a chief. To be sure, he was a good deal a figure-head, conspicuous mainly by his absence; but now and then he descended upon the office, to keep in touch with the outward presentment of his source of salary, and to assure himself by personal observation that his subordinate was performing all his proper functions. One such descent had taken place, the morning after Tremaine had assumed possession of a revolving chair, a desk and a draughting table in an upper office looking out on Mountain Hill; and now, ten mornings later, a second one was imminent. This time, moreover, he was not alone. Instead of that, there followed him into the office another man, young, slim and wiry, obviously an American, equally obviously of gentle birth. His head was set on well-knit, athletic shoulders; but his cheeks were slightly gaunt, and showed white beneath the summer's tan.

"Tremaine," his chief spoke genially; "I want you to know Mr. Donald Rhodes of New York, and then I want you to go to work to make him like Quebec. I fancy he has n't the most favourable notions of the place, as he's just been lying up at the Jeffrey Hale."

"Ill? Sorry to hear that," Tremaine observed conventionally, as he took the stranger's outstretched hand, registering, the while, his instant liking of the deep-set blue eyes, under their thin and arching brows.

The liking increased, as the stranger dismissed his sympathy with a careless nod.

"Not ill," he said, much as he might have said "not guilty." "I merely fell a victim to my own appendix."

"That's rather bad, sometimes," Tremaine suggested.

"Yes; at least, it's decent to consider it so. However, for my part, I think it's a relief to get the blasted thing out of the way," Don made philosophical response. "The worst thing about it was the ignominy of being lugged off to the hospital, with a mob of girls beseeching the orderlies not to kill me, and then pursuing me with flowers enough to set up a small funeral. Bah! I smell those beastly lily-things now!" he added, in a wave of healthy and reminiscent disgust.

His elderly companion judged it time to offer explanation. Even his short experience of Donald Rhodes had taught him the young American's trick of leaping over all manner of details, leaving his acquaintances to flounder after him through a perfect morass of noncomprehension.

"Mr. Rhodes came up here, three weeks ago, with my old friend, Mrs. Van Schaik of New York," he hastened to interpose, as soon as Don came to a full pause. "They were here for four days, came up in their own car, you know, and meant to see the city from end to end." Tremaine's quick ear caught the note of British amusement at the peculiar Americanism of the expedition. "Unfortunately, Mr. Rhodes was taken ill, the first night, and the rest of the party had to go back without him. I might add," he went on a little pompously; "that, before she went away, Mrs. Van Schaik entrusted him to my care."

"He could n't have been placed in be'ter hands," Tremaine asserted dutifully.

Quite as dutifully, the recipient of the compliment bowed his thanks, while Don looked with dancing eyes from one grave face to the other. Did they never see the inherent skittishness of life, these Britishers, he wondered flippantly. It must be hard to keep it up, from dawn to dusk, on any such exalted plane as that. He resolved to cut in again, and seek to drag the situation down to his own level.

"After all," he said; "it's well out and over, and I won't let it happen again. The doctor assures me I can safely promise as much as that. And then, it's such a decent, conventional sort of thing to do, nowadays. I only hope Mrs. Van won't forget to telephone about it to the society editor of *The Sun*. However, as I say, both the episode and the appendix are no more. I'm back at the Château again, and off my diet. Which reminds me, Tremaine, why won't you come around there and have luncheon with me?"

Tremaine looked up, smiled, hesitated, then shook his head. The negation cost him a good deal more than he would have cared to admit, for Bernon Tremaine's creed held little favour for instant likings such as he felt for this gay, irresponsible youngster who dismissed all sympathy quite as lightly as he had dismissed his unmournd vermiform appendix.

"I am sorry. I really wish I could do it, Rhodes," he answered. "The truth of the matter is, at two I have an engagement that I can't well break; and it's five to one, now."

"Make it dinner, then?" Don suggested. "I hate

to eat alone. All right? At seven? And, if you don't get bored, we'll gossip later."

"You can't," Tremaine assured him, while he nodded acquiescence to the invitation. "You have n't been here long enough to accumulate the necessary data."

"Data be hanged!" Don told him cheerily. "I know all the life history of my doctor and my nurse. She was forty, and had one eye put in bias, and she had been engaged at eighteen to a man who fought in some war or other, Ashantee, or Afghanistan, or else the Indian Mutiny. Anyhow, he was scalped. 'll tell you the rest, over the coffee, this evening."

Tremaine laughed. Heretofore, he had counted Gerrans amusing; but the humour of Gerrans, beside that of this happy-go-lucky youngster, seemed stale and banal in its conventionality. He resolved to make the most of this new acquaintance, if only for the sake of seeing upon what unexpected tangent Don's mind would next take flight. On his side, it never would have occurred to him to take such flights; yet some vagrant streak in his own mental make-up led him to revel in them, once they were taken. And Don was singularly likable to look upon, with his jolly dark blue eyes and the incongruous contrast between his flexible lips and the unyielding lines of his rugged chin. There was character behind the mirth, Tremaine decided; life would not be wholly frivolous, even to this jovial boy. Given a crisis, he would meet it pluckily, unflinching.

"Are you staying on here long?" he queried rather absently, while he made his mental notes of the other's personality.

Don flushed at the perfunctory courtesy of the ac-

cent. Ignorant of its cause, he interpreted it as the result of a desire to restore him to the graver levels whence he had wantonly departed.

"A week or so. It depends entirely on circumstances," he answered briefly. "At seven, then?" And he departed, a little regretful over the invitation he had given to this stolid Briton, more than a little dubious over the way the stolid Briton and he would amalgamate, during the leisurely courses of the Château dining-room. Granted Tremaine as comrade, a railway lunch-counter would have been far more in accord with Don's present ideas of enjoyment.

But Tremaine, as he stood looking after the young American, was filled with pleasant expectations of the unexpected. However, not even Bernon Tremaine had any notion of what unexpected phases of their future acquaintance were already written on the cards, as yet undealt.

CHAPTER FOUR

FOR the first time in many days, Sister St. Saba was summoned to parlour. She obeyed the summons with a leisurely dignity, as befitted her weight in pounds, as well as her standing in the community. The pad of her soft shoes came deliberately nearer along the bare floor of the inner corridor, and turned into the room behind the corridor. This room was shut quite away from the world without, connected with it only by the small, square wicket which offered a meagre substitute for contact with the friends led by their loyalty to visit the kin who had turned their backs upon their worldly selves and their concerns for ever. Deliberately Sister St. Saba unpinned her white serge skirt which she had looped up high above her practical gray stuff petticoat; deliberately she settled her bands and her veil with her two plump hands; deliberately she seated herself upon the uncomfortable chair drawn up before the wicket. Then she opened the wicket itself.

"Bernon!" she said then, and not even her holy vows could lessen her start of surprise.

The man, seated outside the wicket, smiled at her tone, although the smile made scant impression upon the settled gravity of his face. It curved his lips; but it died away before ever it reached his eyes.

"Yes, I am back in town once more," he told her.

Her answering smile lighted her whole face. She was a plump, trim woman of the early fifties, with more than a hint of beauty, as measured by the standards of the world outside. Her face was peaceful; but not at all impersonal, as are the faces of too many nuns. Her life within the cloister had in no way dulled her interest in the human race outside; and she carried her years alertly, easily, and with a half-conscious sense of their added charm which many a worldling might have envied. Once, when her frontlet slipped a little, Tremaine caught a glimpse of a single lock of brown hair, dark as the brows above the brilliant pale-brown eyes; and her cheeks, inside their framing bands of linen, were delicately pink and chubby as any Paris doll. And yet, above all else, Sister St. Saba's charm lay in her ready smile.

"It is good to see you again," she said cordially, and in an English so perfect as to seem quite out of place in that distinctly French community; "I did not know you were within a thousand miles of here. But then, inside this place, we hear nothing, nothing, except as now and then our friends pay us a visit. And you? You are well?" Her eyes searched his face.

"Quite well. I always am; and the life in the bush suits me, you know."

With a swift gesture, she dismissed his reference to the outer world, as to something quite beyond her ken. Instead, —

"Have you been here long?" she asked.

"Ten days. I should have been to see you before, only that my office keeps me on duty at this hour," he said, with a slight accent of apology.

The gesture of dismissal came again.

"What matter? At least, as long as you are here now? Our rules forbid us to receive visits too often; and I never worry for those of my friends who have given me their word to be brought here in case of illness."

This time, his eyes showed his amusement.

"That is a grewsome suggestion, Sister St. Saba. It gives one the idea that you would be glad to get me down inside your walls."

"I should," she answered briefly, but with obvious meaning.

He chose to disregard the meaning.

"And you would take care of me, yourself?" he asked her lightly. "But then, where else would I go?"

"The Jeffrey Hale," she answered jealously. "That would be a sad day for me. Your place is here among us." Again there came the note of meaning. Then she dismissed it, and spoke more downrightly. "In any case, there is no need for worry. We all are in the hands of the good God, you in your forest, I in my cloister and my sick-ward. But tell me, Bernon, are you to be in town for many days?"

"All winter, I hope. I have had enough of the bush for the present, and there was a vacancy here in town."

"The same work?"

"Yes, with a difference," he explained, too intent upon his own plans to heed the fact that, as a rule, a cloistered nun knows little of the professions of the outer world, cares even less. "It is office work, theory instead of fact; but it amounts to the same thing in the long run. Anyway, it will be good to get in touch with people again, after fourteen months of the other thing."

"And you find the same old friends always ready to welcome you back?" The nun spoke quietly, her voice more full of assertion than of question.

"Yes, the same ones, and a few more. Gerry and Allison Carhart, of course, are the most important of them. And, by the way, I met a new boy, this noon, a fellow from New York, and I liked him immensely." Man-fashion, he leaped headlong into his new interest, quite forgetful that, by her holy vows, interests of that kind were forbidden to Sister St. Saba.

After the fashion of women of all time, she tried to meet him on his own ground.

"Who is that?" she asked.

"A man who is staying at the Château," he replied, with a smile that was less for her than for his recollection of the subject of their talk. "His name," he added carelessly, as one giving a fact of no importance at all; "is Donald Rhodes. I beg your pardon. Did you say something?"

But Sister St. Saba merely had caught her skirt under one of the legs of her chair. The cross upon her breast was swinging sharply to and fro in her efforts to free herself; but, when she looked up, it was with her usual unruffled little smile.

"Donald Rhodes. It is a good name." She glanced at her swaying cross, then laid her hand upon it, steadying it into position. "And you like him?"

"Extremely." Again Tremaine showed he was all a man by the tranquil fashion in which he accepted the fact of her interest in his concerns, however incongruous they might be. "He is a bit unusual, unlike the men I have known, that is."

"In manner, or in look?" In her feigned interest

in his interests, the nun seemed to forget that her hand was still shut on the silver cross which hung about her neck. After all, she was apparently very much a woman, playing the hostess with a graciousness which quite annulled the wicket parting her from her guest. Allison Carhart herself could have manifested no more courteous absorption in following up the subject of Tremaine's talk.

"Both. He is as frank as a boy in knickerbockers, and about as unceremonious, takes it for granted that he's chums with all the world. He is chums, too. One can't help feeling it. But his looks help him on. He's not exactly handsome; in fact, you can't make up your mind whether he's a pretty baby, or a man that will put you in your place and keep you there. It's chiefly the question of those little, dark blue eyes of his, I fancy." Contrary to his custom, Tremaine was fast becoming garrulous, as he exploited the charms of this, his latest interest.

The nun's hand slid from her cross into her lap, where it clasped the other hand and rested there, shut tight.

"Blue eyes?"

"Yes, dark blue, dark, dark; and the complexion and the mouth of a girl. That's what makes the incongruity of the chap. His chin looks as if you might as well try to budge Mount Ararat." Tremaine was talking to his other self now, more than to the nun whose holy impersonality should have made her no proper receptacle for human analyses such as this was fast becoming. Moreover, ever since his meeting Don, that noon, Tremaine had been waiting for a chance to reckon out the details of the impression made upon him

by this irresponsible youngster from the States. Now, almost unconsciously, he was finding the barrenness, the hush of the little parlour a fair substitute for the walls of his own mind.

The nun, however, still smiling, still retained her courteous interest in his theme.

"And has he been here long?" she queried, while she unclasped her hands and smoothed down her shining white linen rochet.

"Three weeks. In fact," Tremaine laughed; "he has been amusing himself a good deal in your line, Sister St. Saba. He is just up from an operation for appendicitis."

"Oh — h — h!" The intonation on the monosyllable was wholly British, not exclamatory.

"Yes. He came up here with a party of friends, was taken ill and had to go to the Jeffrey Hale, while they went back without him. Think what he lost, by not coming here!" he added. "Then he might have had you to take care of him."

The woman vanished in the nun.

"Who knows?" Sister St. Saba answered, with a grave disregard of the trivial jest. "I should have done my best for him." Then, glancing suggestively at the clock upon the opposite wall, she rose with a definiteness which Tremaine could not well fail to imitate.

Because it is the commonplace which longest escapes observation, Allison Carhart, walking rapidly down Palace Hill, started in surprise, as she saw Tremaine descending the Hôtel-Dieu steps.

"Bernon! What in the world are you doing here? I never expected to see you exiting from that portal. Is it a case of ghostly consolation?"

Tremaine nodded an off-hand greeting, as he lifted his cap, then fell into step beside her.

"Don't I look it?" he inquired imperturbably.

"Not you. In fact," Allison scanned his face intently; "you don't look as if you'd been having much consolation of any sort. What's the trouble, Bernon? Have they been abusing you in there?"

He shook his head.

"Quite the contrary. They don't, I fancy; at least, abuse is n't written down in their official schedule."

"Of course! I know!" Allison remarked, apropos of her own meditations. "You engineers are always sending fragments of humanity up to town for repairs. I can't imagine how you ever contrive to spoil so many people."

Tremaine allowed her to have her way with her own theory. After all, why not? It was as good as any other, and as usable; and she had formed it without any help or suggestion from himself.

"It's a strenuous sort of a profession," he reminded her accordingly.

She laughed into his intent face, which was scarcely above her own.

"But it is n't the professional ones you spoil," she gave counter reminder promptly.

"Give us time," he bade her.

"Hush!" she commanded, with a little shiver. "Don't you know it is tempting Providence to talk like that? But where are you bound now?"

"Back to the office."

She glanced at her watch.

"What's the use? The afternoon is half over now;

you may as well make it a whole half-holiday, and come with me, instead."

"Where?"

"To the Falls. Where else does anybody ever go, down Palace Hill? Unless, that is, we are engineers, looking up our professional invalids." Her wide hat shaded the upper part of her face; but Tremaine could see that her lips were curling into a mocking smile.

The smile, or perhaps its mockery recalled him from his hesitation. He snapped the case of his watch which he had taken out in answer to the unspoken challenge that seems to come with any statement of the time of day, and thrust the watch back into his pocket.

"No use, Allison. I said I would be in at half-past three. It's five past now. I'll go on down, and put you on the train; then I must be dashing back again to the post of duty."

"Sorry. However, you need n't do any especial dashing now," she remonstrated hastily. "I've lost one good train by stopping to talk to you, and there is any amount of time before the next one is ready. Why can't you cut the office, this afternoon, and come for a walk with me? We shall have time for a long one, and then Gerry is coming down for tea, and we'll all come up together."

Her voice was tempting; tempting, too, was her programme. However, Tremaine had made up his mind, five minutes before, and it was not his habit to change. His excuse of the office, that afternoon, was but the flimsiest pretense. There was absolutely nothing for him to do; there was little chance that any one would mount the stairs leading to his door. His appointment there had been made upon the spur of the

moment and with himself; yet, made, Tremaine felt himself bound to keep it to the letter. He was in no mood to face Allison's gay, mocking questions and conjectures regarding his visit to the Hôtel-Dieu; least of all, to face them when Gerrans was there to look on, an amused, but silent witness of the scene. Even to those two, his most well-tried friends, Bernon Tremaine had never cared to speak of his visits to the great, gray-stone house of healing. They would approve the fact the less, in that they could never grasp its cause. To their easy-going minds, schooled to the tenets of the Thirty-Nine Articles, Tremaine's seeming indifference to the outward forms of religious worship made him appear a bit of an agnostic. It would be inconceivable to them both that he could be on terms of friendly, informal intercourse with one of the Hospitalière nuns, the most rigid, as they were the most aristocratic, of all the orders in the ancient city.

Allison Carhart, glancing at Tremaine's face, had the supreme good sense to make no effort at shaking the determination written there. The past few days had taught her some new lessons concerning this old, old friend. During the fourteen months before that, months when they had kept in touch only by means of occasional letters and Tremaine's still more occasional trips to town, it seemed to her that his character had been hardening, crystallizing; and as yet she was not sure just where the lines of crystallization lay. Until she knew the strength and the weakness of this silent, self-contained man walking beside her now; until she knew the elements which had gone to the making of his outward character, the secret hopes and fears and cares and even the worries which had brought a certain light

of determination into his yellow eyes, had moved him to do this and that thing, freakish and self-contradictory to all seeming: until then, Allison Carhart was resolved to take him exactly as she found him, and at his surface value. Later? She did not know. She might be helpful to him; she might even come to rely on his support. Meanwhile, it should be his fault and his alone, if ever they ceased to be good chums.

A part of this attitude she had thought out for herself; a part of it was the result of her one-sided discussions with Gervase Gerrans who had a trick of allowing her to talk herself into sharing his own beliefs and finally into deciding that she herself had originated them. As result, Allison was keeping open house for Tremaine, during those early days in town when he had not yet launched himself upon the social tide. She was always at home, when he came, always hospitable; but she never insisted on his outstaying his own good time, nor on his doing anything at all, in fact, unless he chose. Free to come and go at will, to talk or to be silent, Tremaine had promptly fallen back into his old way of considering the Carhart house his second home, open to him at all his leisure hours. Allison he treated more than ever as a trusted crony, something midway between the sister who belongs to one, the friend whom one takes of deliberate choice, and the other self to whom one never feels the need of explaining anything whatever.

Now and then, when he stopped to analyze the situation, Tremaine felt gratitude to Allison for making herself so much a matter of course, for showing herself so much less insistent than the other girls with whom his social lot was cast. Mrs. Carhart, who knew all that

the world could know about his history and judged it with the kindly eyes of motherhood, felt a pitiful affection for the spare, silent man with the inexpressive face and the veiled eyes; but Allison, younger and more prone to see the humour of a situation, now and then lifted her brows and smiled across at Gerrans above the head of her unconscious guest. If one only ever knew what produced those fits of taciturnity, she said to Gerrans, late one night when Tremaine had been more than ordinarily impenetrable, if one only could foresee their coming, it would be possible to escape and leave him to have it out alone. At present rate of progress, her embroidery would not outlast another week, instead of doing for all winter, as she had hoped.

But Gerrans shook his head.

"He'll get over it in time," he predicted. "Let him alone, though, while it's working off. It's safer for you, and a long way more agreeable for the survivors to let him settle them alone."

"Them?" she questioned.

"Yes, his spiritual dregs. Once they're gone, his whole system will clear up. We all of us go through the stage now and then; the only difference is that some of us don't consider it a drawing-room accomplishment. The fact of it is, Allie, you are spoiling Tremaine abominably."

"What harm?" she made intrepid answer. "Anyway, I mean to do it; there is n't anybody else, Gerry. Imagine it, yourself, the feeling that there's not a soul in the world belonging to you, not a soul whose duty it is to put up with your bad tempers! It's enough to make him — 'dreggy,' to use your own choice word.

No wonder he likes to come here, and sit about and sulk, and pretend he feels at home."

But Gerrans shook his head again.

"Tremaine is n't sulky, Allie. There's more to it than that."

"What then?"

The voice of Gerrans dropped a little.

"Allie, I am no student of human nature, only a mere newspaper man. Ask me the same question, ten years from now, and possibly I may tell you then. I can't before. Twenty years ago, I knew Bernon Tremaine just exactly as well as I do now."

And Allison made sorrowful assent.

The next afternoon, however, she hailed him in quite another mood.

"The unexpected has happened," she proclaimed, as soon as Gerrans and the tray had joined her on the gallery at Kent House.

"Wherefore, and who?" Gerrans looked about him for a place to bestow his hat and stick. "You are so desperately sudden, Allie."

"I meant to be. I have news."

"Ah?" Gerrans took to himself the toast plate and served his hostess, then himself, with absolute impartiality.

"Bernon has discovered an affinity."

"You don't say! Apropos, I know it's not good manners to talk with one's mouth full; but I decline to bolt, and your countenance betrays the fact that you desire an immediate response. Who is she?"

"She's a he," Allison corrected calmly, as she stirred her tea.

"Is it? Well, how do you know?"

"I met him on the way down here."

"Which him?" Gerrans queried, while he waited for his tea to cool down to the point of safety.

"Bernon, of course. He told me all about it, and really he sounds rather nice, for an American," Allison continued, with the placid arrogance of her race. "I told him to bring him to tea, Monday," she added.

"If he's an American, you'd better give him coffee and saltines," Gerrans advised her. "Where did Tremaine discover him?"

Allison explained at length. Then, as the merest afterthought, —

"By the way, Gerry," she asked; "where do you suppose I discovered Bernon?"

"The Salvation Army barracks, or else give it up," Gerrans answered indolently. "Hang it all, Allison, you're as inquisitive as the sphinx. How in thunder should I know?"

"General omniscience. However, you hit the wrong side of the street, that time, wrong side in every sense, literal and ecclesiastical. He was just coming out of the Hôtel-Dieu."

"The deuce!" Gerrans set down his cup with a clatter. "What was he doing there? You don't suppose the chap is going over, Allie?"

She laughed at the consternation in his tone.

"Not Bernon! No; it was a visit of charity, hunting up some of his men that had been in accidents down on the line." And she held out her hand for Gerrans's cup, totally unconscious of the falsehood of her own statement.

CHAPTER FIVE

"THREE lumps, really, Mr. Rhodes?"

"Do you begrudge it so much as all that, Allie?" Gerrans challenged her.

"Yes. The spoiled tea, that is. You are welcome to have the extra lumps to carry away with you; but I do hate to see them misapplied. Well, as you were saying —"

"Thank you. I'm sorry to misapply your sugar; but, as it happens, I like my hemlock sweetened." Then Don corrected himself hastily, as he took the cup from Allison's outstretched hand. "At least, I don't exactly hate the tea," he added, with refreshing candour. "It's only that one makes such a terrific row about it, nowadays. It's a sort of gastronomic thesis, to prove one is worthy to be graduated into better things."

"Eats, or drinks?" Gerrans queried.

Don was ready for him.

"As a rule, the oysters come next," he explained, with conscientious accuracy. "That is, unless you're Semitic, and can't touch 'em, for fear of getting yourself contaminated. In that case, it's a passover. But, as I was saying, Miss Carhart, the two chief products of Quebec appear to be hospitals and monuments. I suppose you got into the habit of them, from being in so many sieges; but, really, it does strike a stranger

that you make an undue amount of preparation for his being stricken down upon your very threshold. No wonder I yielded to the influences of the place and was bowled over promptly."

"You did n't get a monument, though," Tremaine reminded him unkindly.

"That was the doctor's doing; not mine. I provided all the necessary items; but he neglected to work them up into a proper total. You'll have to charge the failure to him. However, since I've seen that bicephalous arrangement in front of the Drill Hall, I am quite resigned. Speaking of monuments, though, is it a fact that you have five hospitals here?"

Allison shook her head.

"No; only two," she corrected.

"So much the better. Five sounds a bit too premortuary," Don responded. "But I was sure that Tremaine told me there were five. I was especially taken with the naming of the Civic one; it sounds so gloriously official."

"Have you seen it?" Gerrans asked him, with an amused glance across at Allison, still busy with the tea.

"Seen it! No. I'm no board of inspectors, hunting grisly microbes. In fact, though, I've not seen much of anything, except the corners of the city where you people play. That's the joy of Tremaine here; he is a guide of sorts, and does n't waste my time sending me about to look at the historic bores one can study up on any post-card counter. Instead of that, he imparts learning to me, while we're sitting about and smoking, after dinner. It's solid learning, too. Tremaine seems to know a wonderful amount of facts," Don concluded suddenly.

"The question is, does he expect you to know them too," Allison inquired, while she settled her cosy with a final punch, and then, her duties done, settled herself, cup in hand, to enjoy the talk.

"If he does, he gets him- self left to take naps, while he talks," Don confessed, with a calm lack of patience. "I wake up, every now and then, to make sure he's going on and not going off; and, before I can go back to sleep, he generally sticks the barb of at least one fact inside my brain, to serve as nucleus for future dreams. That's how I know about the Civic Hospital. I heard him mention it, just as I dropped off, and I promptly fell asleep and dreamed your Chief Justice was head nurse there, with a white bib-apron strapped on outside his black satin clothes, and a starched white cap skewered to his official wig with a glass thermometer." And Don paused long enough to drink his tea at a gulp.

"Is it safe to offer you some more?" Allison asked doubtfully.

"Safe; but not advisable. It would be five jumps, or nothing, and I dare not put our nerves to such a test. Thanks. Really, not another drop," he said, blowing his cup with a manifest air of relief. But he did not say that he wanted to know, Miss Carhart asked him a thing to ask Tremaine."

For an instant, Allison caught her breath at the unexpectedness of this young American's question. Was it possible that he too had noticed when she breathed more freely. Without waiting her permission, Don had swept on with his question.

"Do the fellows ever do anything?" he queried, in a stage aside. "Anything but canoes and golf, you

know? At home, we have to work. We sit in offices and grind, all day long and every day. Up here, your fellows just loaf about and watch the weather and the coming of the mails: and then they put on their other coats and go out to drink tea."

"Oh, Lord! For heaven's sake!" It was Gerrans who came to the aside.

"That's the way it looks to me," Don assured

"I'll come down to my office to-morrow morning,"
said him.

"Have a office, then?" Don asked him guileless. "I'm sure you don't look it. However, there are offices and offices. Tremaine's, for instance. He uses his as a place to stow away his morning paper. It's rather a nice idea, too; it saves cluttering up the library floor at home. What I want to know, though, is whether it really is the custom of the country. If it is, I think I'll go about getting my organization papers made out at once."

Tremaine smiled, as he delivered a counter thrust.

"If it is the custom of the country, Rhodes, you'd make a ripping subject. You could move in at once, without needing any training whatsoever."

Allison laughed at the exchange of chaff. Then she rose to the defence of Tremaine.

"But, up here, we call Mr. Tremaine rather unduly energetic, Mr. Rhodes," she said.

Tremaine sent her a nod of gratitude, not because he was in need of defence, but because it was good to get it, unasked, unneeded.

"Really? What does he do? Of course, I've seen the draughting board and the desk. The same bit of

rubber has lain on the same spot on the tracing paper, ever since I came," Don argued gently.

"Exactly." To her own surprise, Allison was conscious of a little wave of antagonism at this continued assault upon her friend. With Gerrans she would not have minded; but Bernon Tremaine took things more to heart. "But has it ever occurred to you, Mr. Rhodes, that you entered that office, hand in hand with the chief, and so —"

"And so all operations stopped, as long as I was on the horizon? Really, Tremaine, you owe me a good deal, now we think it over. I had been supposing it was the other way about," Don made response, with unabated serenity. "We'll call the account square, then, and start again. To-morrow, I'll make a tour down town to watch you fellows at your work."

"Mr. Tremaine is just in from the bush. He has been out on the line, now, for more than a year," Allison observed, as she poured herself another cup of tea.

"The line?"

"The Transcontinental."

Don forgot his hostess, and spun about to face Tremaine.

"You don't say so? The new line that one sees the pictures of? Why did n't you tell me? Why, man alive, that's work!"

"Tremaine never tells of his achievements," Gerrans struck in languidly. "He expects us to know them by intuition."

"Intuition be hanged!" Don said conclusively. "If I did that kind of thing, I'd prate about it, day and night. It's what I would have done, too, if only I'd had a little more brains and a little less pull. Those two

details, balanced as they are, would have taken the edge out of all the glory, so I preferred to let it alone." He pulled himself up short. "We'll talk that out, to-night," he added, with a nod across at Tremaine who had sat, an impassive listener to the conversation.

Tremaine nodded back at him shortly. All his life, he had accepted the fact of his isolation quite as a matter of course. It was a new experience to him, the way this young American was counting him into all his plans, not as an outsider to be entertained, but as a natural adjunct to his daily routine. Moreover, Tremaine liked the experience. It would be short-lived; it was wholly causeless. None the less, while it lasted, it gave him the curious feeling of belonging somewhere in particular, not of drifting aimlessly along, a detached chip upon the human tide.

"By the way, Miss Carhart," Don said, as he rose to go, a little later; "what's the building just across the street, the huge gray one inside the wall?"

"That's one of the hospitals you counted up among your five. Has n't Mr. Tremaine told you?"

"I think probably I did n't give him any chance; or else I went to sleep. Which one is this?"

"It's the Hôtel-Dieu, the largest one of all."

"Hôtel-Dieu, the Mansion of the Lord." There came an odd little note of reverence in Don's gay voice. "I always rather liked the literal meaning of the phrase, Miss Carhart; and just now — But this one, is it like the Jeffrey Hale?"

"Not at all. It's in the hands of nuns."

"Of nuns? That barracks! I did n't know you had so many here."

"Certainly," Allison assured him. "We could n't

get on without them, either. Really, they are exceedingly useful to the city. They educate our children; they nurse us when we are ill; they make our soap, and they even mend our clothes."

But Don waved aside the last of her enumeration.

"Oh, I would n't care for them as nurses," he observed discursively. "They would be so very floppsy."

"Perhaps. They say they do it very well, though. They're not supposed to be admitted to the wards until they have proved their fitness for the work. Come over to the window, Mr. Rhodes, and see the place at sunset."

Rising from her chair beside the tray, she crossed to the nearest window. Don followed at her side, noting with critical approval the strong, agile step, the alert poise of her whole body. She was not at all pretty, he told himself; at least, not when judged according to the standards of the fluffy, frilly girls he had known at home. She seemed stronger than they in every sense, stronger in body and will and nerves; yet she was singularly feminine withal, and full of charm. Her dress was like her person, dainty, but very simple and sedate. He tried to imagine her in Hilda's clothes and set off by Hilda's coiffure which was a bewildering mass of coils and puffs and little rings of loosened locks which always threatened to fall down, and never did. Allison's thick brown hair was drawn loosely away from her face and twisted into a great soft knot that lost all its edges in the natural outline of her head. Her frock was good in colour and material; but it was totally devoid of decoration. And yet, all the details of her person seemed absolutely in keeping with the best traditions of the hour of tea, restful, attractive, but not unduly stimulating.

The fine old drawing-room carried out the same impression. Filling all one side of the second story of the house, it had a trio of great windows at each end, west and east, windows whose deep casements showed the thickness of the outer walls. Between the two ends was the grate, filled now with purring coals above which danced purple and pink tongues of flame; and drawn up on either side, at angles as convenient as they were unconventional, were the piano and an old mahogany sofa heaped with cushions. Everything in the room was good; everything was comfortable; nothing was inartistic, and yet no place could have been imagined more alien to the work of a modern decorator. Like its presiding spirit, the Carhart drawing-room was product of an environment where home comfort and hospitality were the main essentials, rather than incidentals of the day's formal routine.

"Look! You are just in time," Allison said, as she drew aside the curtains of one of the rear windows. "I always love it best at sunset."

In deference of Don's later plans, that day, tea had been served earlier than usual, and now the sun was only just dropping behind the taller buildings at the west. Directly beneath the windows lay a heap of gray stone ruins, shabby relic of some recent fire; but, a little obliquely to the right, the great bulk of the Hôtel-Dieu lay basking in the last pink glow of sunset, a mighty giant of healing and of peace. Its solid stone front, in its aggressive modernness, offered strange contrast to the courts and wings behind, courts shut to all the outer world, wings white with time and suns and snows, pierced with close ranks of narrow windows and topped with high, slanting roofs studded with dormers

whose every pane of glass threw back the beams of sunset, trying to force an entrance and disclose the secrets of the cloisters hidden within. From ancient gallery and dormer up to latter-day façade, in that one rambling building seemed summed up and typified the entire history of the aged city, the entire social system, so outwardly hospitable, yet so totally impenetrable to the alien world.

A part of this Don realized by instinct. A part of it he was destined to learn much later. None the less, looking out, he gave a little shudder.

"Looks a regular fortress," he made comment. "I'm not sure I'd care to get in there; one might have trouble in getting out again. I think I prefer my dreamed-of Civic Hospital, in spite of its name; it sounds less formidable." And he drew back from the window, with a little laugh.

Gerrans, meanwhile, had sauntered to the window facing out upon the street. Now he looked backward over his shoulder.

"The Civic Hospital chances to be the pest house, Rhodes," he remarked across the room. "But come here a minute, if you want to see the gentler virtues of your fortress."

And Don, nothing loath, went in answer to his summons. What he saw there justified the phrase of Gerrans. Under the pinkish sunset sky, a trio of working nuns in their coarser garb were just straightening themselves up from above the almost dismantled garden beds which filled the space within the gray stone wall. At their feet lay baskets and trowels, implements of their sunset toil; and, in the nearer distance, a cow grazed on a bit of lawn. For a little, the women loitered and

looked about them, up at the sky, across at the white, copper-roofed buildings of their life-long home. Then, as a distant bell cut across the quiet air, they stooped, gathered up their tools and baskets, and walked slowly towards an inner wall.

"Look!" And, as Gerrans spoke, Don could feel Tremaine, standing at his other side, stiffen into still attention.

In the inner wall, a gate had opened to admit the nuns, and in the open gateway there came into view a dainty vision of a plump and rosy face above a soft white bundle of serge and linen, a face set in stiff white folds beneath a long black veil and, in the sunset glow, clearly discernable in its every feature. Then the vision stood aside, the nuns walked through the gateway and the portai closed behind them, just as the last pink flush vanished from the sky, leaving behind it only the chilly gray of late October.

A week later, Don came again. This time, he found Mrs. Carhart beside the tray: and he promptly deposited his allegiance at the feet of this strange woman whose personal charm was enough to triumph over an uncompromisingly tight bodice buttoned straight up the middle of the front, and a coiffure suggestive of the little silver knob that headed his umbrella. To his acute mortification, it was the odour of the dinner coming towards the table which warned him it was time to go, and Mrs. Carhart's bidding to stay on and dine with them he accepted with the barest pretext at hesitation.

Only three days later, he presented himself once more, and, this time, his countenance was rueful.

"I'm quite aware that this is rushing your hospitality, Miss Carhart," he blurted out, as soon as Allison ap-

peared upon the threshold of the drawing-room. "Still, this time it's wholly justifiable. I've come to say good bye."

"Going away, Mr. Rhodes? I am so sorry." Allison's tone was as sincere as was the clasp of her strong, warm hand on his.

"Yes, I'm off for Montreal, to-night," he answered dejectedly.

"Sit down." She pointed to a chair beside the hearth. Then, "Is n't it rather a sudden plan?" she asked him.

"It is to me. I had felt as if I were taking root here; you've been so good to me, and all that," he told her, with a simple heartiness which she liked. "I'd had an idea of staying on, for two or three weeks longer."

"Then why go?" was Allison's not unnatural question.

"My father cabled. He's in Europe; or did n't I tell you? He is over there with my cousin Hilda; and, for a wonder, he thinks the office needs me. It's too bad, too," Don added thoughtfully. "The cable could n't much more than have left when he'd have had my letter, telling him how much fun I was having here. I always do tell him things, you know; and, this time, I wrote him about everything: the place, and you, and Tremaine, and all."

She nodded her thanks for his inclusion of her in his missive. Now and then, there was an extreme boyishness in Don's manner which left his British hearers at a loss what answer they should make him.

"You've told Bernon?" she inquired, after a little pause.

"He came to luncheon with me, this noon. It was a

funeral feast, as far as I was concerned. I hate saying good bye to people, Miss Carhart, and I like Tremaine. He's a good fellow. And yet — " Don floundered, then came to a full halt.

"And yet?" There was the faintest possible edge in Allison's tone. Knowing Tremaine well, she yet allowed no one to criticise him but herself.

Two pairs of dark blue eyes met each other steadily. Then Don spoke.

"I did n't mean to say it out, Miss Carhart; but I've made the blunder, and I'll see it through. Tremaine is your friend, not mine. I wish he were mine. I like him, in spite of myself, better than I like most men I'm in the habit of meeting. But you've known him practically always. Even you must admit it, though, that Tremaine is n't one half so good a fellow as he might be."

Allison fell back upon a banality.

"Are any of us?" she asked.

Don's reply was unexpected in its frankness.

"Yes. I am. You are. Gerrans is. Tremaine is n't. There's a queer, wild streak in him, as if he had been partly tamed, and that only in spite of himself. It's as if he counted every man his enemy; and kept himself, his real, downright *Ego* shut up inside sheet armour. Now and then, he lifts his vizor to look out, and then we get a glimpse of the man inside."

"Well?" Allison broke the little pause.

"Then we know what he really is, inside his shell," Don answered, with sudden energy. "Miss Carhart, you may laugh at me, if you want to, but I confess, if I were going to have a brother — I've always wanted one, you know — I'd take the man behind those yellow

eyes, the real Bernon Tremaine, sooner than any other man I ever have known. But —"

Allison did not laugh. Instead, she nodded slowly to herself, in full approval of his words. Then, —

"But?" she questioned.

Don's earnestness gave place to a little chuckle.

"But, as soon as I had taken him, I'd put in a charge of dynamite and blow his confounded shell to bits," he told her. "Until that is done, he'll never be of any practical use, either to himself or to his people. By the way, who are his people, anyway? Come to think of it, I have n't met any of them."

Allison reflected swiftly, remembered that Don was just departing, probably, despite his protestations, never to return.

"He has very few relatives, I think," she answered guardedly. "He was left an orphan, when he was a little, little boy, and there were no brothers and sisters." Unconsciously, her voice grew pitiful over the words.

"Poor soul! That may account for a good deal," Don commented. "One needs a few relations in the background to add perspective to one's friends, and also to serve as safety-valve, when things go wrong. Well, anyway, I'm glad to know him; and I fancy," he smiled across at her in boyish approval; "you'll be the one to tame him, if anybody ever can. My prayers be with you during the process! Still, I think he's worth it, all and more." Then he rose to his feet. "I suppose it must be good bye and thank you, Miss Carhart," he said regretfully. "You have done a lot for me, more than you quite know; but I appreciate it all. Really, it does n't sound a conventional thing to mention inside a foreign drawing-room; but I rather think I'm grate-

ful to my departed appendix, considering what it's brought me, by way of compensation." And, with an odd, abbreviated little laugh, he nodded, shut his hand on hers, and then was gone.

And Allison Carhart, used all her life to the come and go of strangers, was conscious of an unaccustomed wave of acute regret, as she stood there alone, listening to his departing footfall on the stairs.

CHAPTER SIX

"DEAR Tremaine," Don wrote him nonchalantly, three months later; "The more I think of it, I like your city, like it a whole lot. I've a cousin who thinks she would like it, too, so I'm bringing her up, next week. Save a little weather for us; and, while you're about it, you might be rather extra energetic, in the meantime, and get some of your strenuous work done up ahead."

Tremaine smiled as he read the note, smiled as he answered it, smiled yet again as he showed it to Allison and together they speculated in regard to its practical details. It was so like Don in its inconsequent fashion of ignoring what should have been the salient points of his tidings.

Nevertheless, by this time Tremaine had gained a fair knowledge of the epistolary style of Donald Rhodes. The three months since Don's departure had been dotted with frequent letters, some of them mere notes, some of them, written in office hours, astonishingly garrulous, but none of them bearing upon their faces any especial reason for their existence. However, Tremaine was always glad when the morning mail brought him the sight of Don's dashing hand on the outside of one of the causeless, whimsical effusions. Viewed solely as a manifestation of good will, they were well

worth the having; and, more than that, they held within them all the germs of future, more enduring friendship.

"What will the cousin be like, though?" Allison inquired.

"From all accounts, like him, only more so," Tremaine told her. "Rhodes used to talk about her constantly. Her name, by the way, is Hilda Lynde."

"On his mother's side, then," Allison made careless comment, while she folded up her embroidery and tossed it to one side, according to her fashion, nowadays, whenever Tremaine was present.

"No; on his father's. I happened to speak of it, one day, and he told me. I fancy she's rather remote, measured by blood; but Rhodes evidently considers her a sister. She was left an orphan, I believe, or else there was n't any money to bring her up, or something of that sort, and she was taken into his family and kept there. She is a little older than Rhodes, so he does n't remember anything about her coming."

Allison smiled, as she watched Tremaine grow genial under the interest of his own story, or else of the memory of Don himself.

"He appears to have confided to you all his domestic history," she remarked.

The genialness eclipsed itself, and Tremaine's answer came a little curtly.

"Rhodes is n't the confiding sort. He merely mentioned it, in explanation of something else that came up, one day," he said, as stiffly as if it had been himself whom Allison had accused of undue expansion.

There was a short pause. It was Allison who broke it, and with an effort at careless unconcern.

"Anyway, we shall rejoice and be glad to have them here, this winter; and we'll do our best to give them a good time. When you write, tell Mr. Rhodes that we're all of us counting on his making us a long visit."

"I've written already," Tremaine answered, still a little curtly.

And Allison confessed to herself that she was glad, a moment later, when Gervase Gerrans came striding into the room.

Christmas by now was so far sunk into the past that the public conscience had freed itself from the burden of unacknowledged gifts, and the little northern city was ready to settle down to that most characteristic season of the year, when, heedless of the outside world, it proceeds to make merry with itself. The merriment is very merry, in the Quebec midwinter: its disregard of all things outside itself is far less selfish than it seems, dictated as it is by an experience which teaches that, for one day out of every seven, all connection with the outside world is likely to be severed. Trains may be blockaded, cancelled, even derailed and abandoned in a drifting blizzard; telegraph wires may be down, or coated with ice to the point of uselessness, and the outer world, looking on, pities the dwellers in the storm-blockaded little city. Their pity is quite thrown away, for the blockaded little city has plenty of resources of her own; and, heedless of wind and snow, she sallies forth to make the most of them.

Of course, in any city, the interests are bound to be complex: but there are some few people whom one meets everywhere, doing everything, and, as a rule, belying the old proverb by doing it extremely well. Among those few were Gervase Gerrans and Allison

Carhart, and into their small inner circle they did their best to draw Bernon Tremaine. Their efforts up to now, however, had not been crowned with a complete success. The source of failure lay in no lack of cordiality towards Tremaine, but in certain inherent reservations in the man himself. As Allison had predicted to Gerrans, months before, they were finding him rather a whale upon their hands. Small of stature and at times totally inexpressive, Tremaine was yet showing himself a bit unwieldy in their little coterie. Moreover, he was elusive. One never felt altogether certain of being able to land him. Just when the deed seemed accomplished safely, he had a trick of dodging away, of vanishing from social sight, only to reappear, a little later, swimming strongly along at quite the other end of the pool.

To say that this trait took from his popularity, however, would be to deny certain of the laws of universal human nature. In all Quebec, that winter, no man was more assailed by invitations to come and render himself agreeable than was Bernon Tremaine. Thanks to the supreme tact and politeness of Allison Carhart, he usually did come. His rendering himself agreeable, though, was quite another matter.

Not that Tremaine ever deliberately set himself to work to be disagreeable. Like the apostle of old, he would do good, but evil was present with him. Worst of all, nine times out of every ten, he had no notion of any disagreeableness until, by the expressions on the faces of the people around him, he suddenly realized that it was a fact accomplished. Then, in sheer, blundering penitence, he proceeded to be ten times worse than he had been before, until even Allison, his social

sponsor and his most forgiving champion, had moments when she longed acutely for the re-establishment of the old-time pillory and whipping-post.

The cause for this was never wholly obvious, even to Tremaine's other self, argue it out as he would with that invisible personality of insistent logic and persistent disapproval. For, after it was all over and social forgiveness had been accorded to him, Tremaine went down into valleys of humiliation undreamed of by such characters as Gervase Gerrans. And yet, he never could fully analyze the cause, nor comprehend it, nor forestall it. The mood came upon him, that was all, came so suddenly and so savagely that it never failed to find him off his guard. Its ultimate key-note was not taken from the scale of jealousy, as many thought it. Rather than that, it seemed to come out of a sense of his own isolation, of his total, congenital aloofness from the whole fabric of the society which lay about him. It came over him in waves; and, for the time being, the waves swept him completely off his feet and left him battling with the relentless undertow that lies beneath the froth and foam which form the beauty of the rising tide.

He did fight against it, too, fight manfully and with a sort of nervous fury, as one fights against a stronger force which, in the end, is sure to win. Again and again he battled against this remorseless power, ever dragging him backward, away from the firm beach where his friends stood watching him, only to cast him up upon the surface of the ocean, afar from any shore. But his struggles were hidden in the splashing foam; only now and then did some watching friend, farther-sighted than the rest, catch a glimpse of a set

face, of straining eyes turned longingly towards the firm foreshore which was slipping out of view.

No one else, not even Allison Carhart, saw any reason for the struggle, dreamed of the undertow which caused it. Knowing the main facts of Tremaine's life, Allison looked upon them with the clear-eyed, impersonal common sense of the outsider whose problem lacks the complicating factor of the personal equation. She was perfectly well aware that, of all their circle, Bernon Tremaine was the only one whose place was not a matter of three or four generations. Of the rest, the parents and the grandparents had been accustomed to call each other by their given names; their family secrets had been common property, albeit veiled in mystery to the other circles that ringed theirs round. An inherited intimacy like this is the closest corporation known to the human race; yet Allison saw no reason that, because of its closeness, it also should be complete. In age and interests and habits, in all his adopted loyalties, Bernon Tremaine's place was among them. If they were willing, eager to receive him, as they were and showed themselves to be, it was not for him to draw back and sit for ever, an outsider, just on the edge of things. Instead, let him come in and make himself count among them for what he really, truly was.

At the first, Allison tacitly assumed that this would be Tremaine's obvious course. She invited him, herself; she saw to it that the others should invite him, until no one but a social agnostic could have doubted the permanency of his place among them all. Then, that done, she sat back, smiling at her own conspicuous success, and waited for Tremaine to amalgamate him-

self into the fabric of the social whole. She waited long, while, little by little, her smile faded. After a lapse of many weeks, weeks which should have seen the amalgamation process finished, she dropped her policy of quiet waiting, took Tremaine in hand, set forth the situation in plain Saxon and then proceeded to lecture him soundly. Then it was, for the first time in his life, that Bernon Tremaine showed out a little of the self-rebuking self-distrust that honeycombed his character. The worst of it all was that, afterward, he could never bring himself to regret the showing. Under circumstances such as that, Allison Carhart was never just like other girls; she saw things less from her own standpoint.

Nevertheless, much as her heart misgave her when she met his yellow eyes, dumb, but appealing in their look of hurt, Allison read out her lecture to the very end. Foolish of him to feel himself an outsider, when they all were so glad to have him back in town to dance with, and slide with, and go skating with! Not even Gerrans, spoiled social darling that he was, could have his pick of girls while he, Tremaine, was making up his mind among them. Foolish to feel it made the slightest difference whether he had ten thousand cousins, or not a single one! People counted for themselves, not for their relatives. She had a round dozen of cousins scattered through the city; but she never met them anywhere, save at the inevitable family Christmas dinner, always such a bore. It was friends whom people chose, not their relations, anyway. Nobody who knew Gerrans ever thought of him as a twig on the branch of his family tree which had produced a Minister of Mines and Fisheries. And was n't

it a little egotistic, after all, for Tremaine to believe that these details, negligible in case of others, counted in the case of himself? What difference did it make to any of them who knew him well, and her blue eyes met his eyes squarely, defiantly, as she baldly put the question; what difference did it really make that he stood there among them, an orphan, cut off and disavowed by some unknown family? The loss lay with the family; he had made good for all time and in all their eyes. His place was ready, waiting. Then let him take it, not as his privilege, but as his well-earned right.

Then she rang for tea, which came promptly, together with a plate of buns, buttery and sizzling hot beneath their cover; and she talked about the sliding, and asked about his latest record at the ski jumping ground. Allison Carhart never wasted herself on iterations. Neither did she go back and remind her hearer of what she had said to him before; not, at least, when the saying was in earnest. Her lecture over, she never again alluded to it. Her farewells to Tremaine, that afternoon, were as gay and careless as it was their custom to be, neither more nor less. Allison Carhart looked on life with the eyes of a woman; but now and then she touched it with the firm grip of a man.

As a matter of course, a lecture such as that was bound to do some good. However, to Allison, looking on, the good seemed to be singularly small, far smaller than she had hoped. Its main effect, as is the case with most lectures, had been upon the mind of the lecturer. Out of it, she had come to know that Tremaine himself was quite well aware of his own failings; that they

worried no one else one half so much as they unnerved himself. Exaggerated egotism is a most unpleasant fault; but its worst effects are strongly retroactive. No one but its own victim can ever know the dizzy heights, the maddening depths to which it leads, the questionings of others' attitudes and the bitter, bitter self-distrust.

By an almost inevitable rule, Tremaine's worst half-hours followed hard upon the heels of his best ones. It was so easy for a man in his position to show out the affection he had for his companions, so easy and so unwarranted. As a rule, one kept one's open manifestations of liking for one's kin, not scattered them about broadcast among one's social mates. From a mere acquaintance, affectionate overtures took on the nature of an insult; they were like compliments, and argued a lack of mental balance upon one side or the other. Things like that should be set aside for use among one's doting relatives; the world at large should be treated with a chaffing indifference. At least, that was the working theory of Bernon Tremaine. And Bernon Tremaine was not only obviously devoid of relatives, doting or otherwise; but, under his cold exterior, he was endowed, was either blessed or cursed, with a singular capacity for self-devotion, for demonstrative affection for those among his friends who touched at any point the hidden standards of his spiritual life. Alone and with his other self, he went over and over the details of their characters with a love the more exuberant because it was, perforce, hidden from all eyes but his own. Out among his fellow men, his existence was a perpetual war between his likings and his need to put a check upon their appearing. Too

often the check went astray, and fell upon the object of the liking. Then the object went his way, astonished at the sudden chill, and resolving to treat Tremaine less familiarly in future; but Tremaine went his way into temporary purgatory whence he emerged, a little later, with the marks of its fires upon him. Afterwards, as a rule, he went in search of Allison, hoping for a salve. She gave it in her tacit comprehension; for she had seen that, in Bernon Tremaine, she was face to face with a man of an infinite capacity for loving, a man to whom Fate had as yet denied all conventional outlet for his love.

Gerrans, meanwhile, appeared to be all outlet; and, busy as any bee, was having a glorious time, storing up honey even in the winter sunshine. The latest of the debutantes, that season, had likewise chanced to be the prettiest; and Gerrans had been paying court to her with an assiduity in no wise checked by the fact that he had paid similar court in turn to each of the three older sisters of the debutante. The debutante herself, however, like too many pretty girls, possessed a literal mind, and Gerrans was fast falling an unwilling victim to his own fascinations, when a young and witty aunt appeared upon the scene quite unexpectedly, and routed the niece on her own ground. Allison Carhart breathed more freely, the first night that the debutante bedewed her pillow with hot tears of anguish.

"It would have served you right, Gerry, perfectly right, if the child had skewered you with her rattle-box and dragged you to the altar at her side. I should n't have felt one bit of sympathy for you. You've flirted with her abominably," she told him.

"I never flirt; it is n't nice," Gerrans objected.

"No; you don't flirt. You just smile at her as if she were the one object on the entire horizon; and you say the nice, agreeable little thing that no one else thinks it worth while to say; and you pull her toboggan up all the steep places, even when you're out sliding with another girl."

"That is n't flirting," Gerrans corrected.

But Allison shook her head at him severely.

"No; it's something a good deal deadlier. What is more, it is n't fair to try it on a girl, before she's had time to cut her social teeth."

"I don't think that's at all a decent metaphor, Allie," he rebuked her. "However, now you're about it, pile in, and have it over. Once you get a mania for this kind of moral massage, the only thing to do is to let you work it off as soon as possible."

Allison laughed.

"But she did think you were in love with her, Gerry," she admonished him.

"So I was," he assured her gravely.

"But you don't stay in love."

"No. Neither did you stay broken out with measles — mercifully for us, as it was distinctly unbecoming to the colour of your hair. But, to resume the allegory, it was measles, all the same, even if it was an evanescent joy. In the same way, you can't expect me to stay in love with one girl all the time, Allie."

"If I were the girl, I should," she told him.

For an instant, his eyes grew grave, while he changed the wording of her phrase.

"If you were the girl, I should," he answered her, with a note which came but rarely into his voice.

Allison was the first to regain her poise.

"What about the Aunt?" she queried.

"She's a dancer of sorts. I found that out, when she came down on my toe, this evening. Beyond that, I don't know; and I'm not even saying what sort, but," he added pensively; "I always did have an affinity for ferric-oxide hair. There! Does n't that sound like one of Tremaine's utterances?"

"Bernon is no chemist," Allison corrected him.

"No. He takes it along other lines. When he proposes, he'll ask the girl if she will place her cantilever hand in his firm anchor arm, and walk away with him up the thirty-per-cent grade of life."

"When he does propose!" Allison echoed.

"He will propose; man always does. And then may I be there to see! When he falls in love, there won't be any extra splashing, though; he'll go to the bottom of it like a chunk of lead."

"I wish I saw any signs of it." Allison sighed a little wearily.

"You won't see them," Gerrans predicted. "There never are any signs, where Tremaine is concerned. First thing you know, he's gone ahead and done it, whatever it is. In fact, he's a very sudden sort of chap," he added reflectively.

Allison laughed.

"You ought to be a good judge, Gerry. You have as many signs as the zodiac, and they never any of them by any chance signify anything. If we had observed the signs you're chronically putting forth, we'd have had you firmly wedded to every girl in the city, years ago."

Gerrans shook his head at the wall of the Hôtel-Dieu which they were passing. The Aunt having been

bespoken, he was solacing himself by taking Allison home, that night.

"You 'd better let me take you, you know," he had urged dispassionately, as he saw her glance turn towards Tremaine, standing just inside the door. "It saves no end of energy, as long as you live next house."

And Allison had laughed, and given her consent. Nevertheless, she had halted on her way to the door for a last bit of talk with Bernon Tremaine. Under all her chaff with Gerrans, the recollection of that talk was still uppermost in her mind now; and it made her deaf to that same unfamiliar note in her companion's voice, as he said, less to her than to the old gray wall beside them, —

"After all, you know, it's the girl one never flirts with that one really wants to marry."

CHAPTER SEVEN

"**W**HERE away now, Bernon?"

Gerrans, going in at his own door, that Sunday noon, sent the hail diagonally across the street.

Tremaine, walking rapidly, his fists stuck into his pockets and his fur cap bowed to meet the wind, looked up at the hail.

"The Falls. I'm walking up the ice bridge. Want to come?"

"Not I. What do you take me for, man? I'm no polar bear, to go clambering over ice floes, such a day as this. There must be fifty degrees of frost, at the very least. Let your ice bridge go, and come in here and have luncheon, like a civilized being."

But Tremaine only laughed, and shook his head, and went his way. He had danced till midnight, danced with a succession of pretty girls who had found him more than customarily taciturn. Now he felt an imperative longing for the wide, white stretches of the river, for nature and for winter at their bleakest.

The mid-day train to the Falls was neither wintry nor bleak. The steaming car was crowded with pleasure seekers, French for the most part and Catholics who, mass over, were taking the rest of the day for holiday. Capped and tuqued and blanket-coated, their snowshoes under their arms, they crammed the aisles, and

filled the air with *patois*. Tremaine surveyed them with incurious eyes, stowed himself away in the seat nearest the door, folded his arms and gave himself over to his meditations. To judge from the expression on that strip of his face which was visible between his cap and his collar, his meditations were not wholly pleasant.

Once free from the car, its crowding and its clamour, however, his face cleared a little. Such human chaos as that was prone to leave him breathless, not only in his lungs, but in all his personality. It was a relief to take in great gulps of the biting air, to fill his ears with the hum of the wind, with the crackling of the shore ice, with the throbbing of the electric wires beside the track, before he turned away from the road beside the rails and struck out along the trodden trail that led out across the frozen river.

An hour later found him striding up the middle of the northern channel of the mighty river, ice-locked now, and so converted from a path for bateaux to a road for sleighs, a narrow road and marked at either edge by a line of little evergreens set there to guide the wayfarer overtaken by blinding storm. He had left the shore far behind by now. Its blue-gray wall of snow stood up sharply, as if holding on its crest one side of the dun-gray sky which arched the river to the other blue-gray wall made by the Island shore. Down the river, far behind him, the blue-gray walls narrowed through a long perspective, until they seemed to come together in the softly-rounded knob of Cap Tourmente which rose, a ball of vivid blue, blocking the farther distance. Far, far before him on its jutting point, the city lay outspread, a great gray monster, clinging tightly to its gray rock wall, and topped with floating bands of

smoke which curled up and lay above it, in every shade of gray from darkest dun to palest pearl.

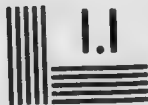
These were the distant boundaries of his view, more distant, even, in appearing than in fact. The ice blotted out all the smaller landmarks and stretched away before him and behind, measureless in its grim monotony. Only by counting the bits of trees beside the roadway, only by marking the changing angle of one's watch-hands and of the buildings dotted on the shore, was it possible to mark one's progress. Infinity would have seemed scarcely more empty of detail than did that huge, white, level stretch of ice.

Heedless of the wind which swept down upon him from the northern shore, Tremaine merely pulled his fur collar up about his ears, settled his pointed krimmer cap more firmly on his head, plunged his fists a little deeper in his pockets, and plodded on along the drifted roadway. His face, meanwhile, was singularly content, his eyes alight. For the time being, self-communings were forbidden to him. It was taking all there was of him, body and brain, to face and conquer the boisterous wind. He gave himself completely to the struggle, and he felt his whole self tingling with the exhilaration of the strife. Twice he stepped aside to allow sleighs to pass him on the narrow trail. As he stood there, waiting, he felt a swift compassion for their occupants, smothered in fur and blankets to their ear-tops. Mere human owls they looked, blinking at him from their warm, cosy nest, and wondering what he was doing, to be abroad and on his own feet upon that lonely ice-road. Later on, as he came into the shelter of the bluff at Beauport Église, the wind seemed dying down a little, and Tremaine walked more slowly,



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watching the scene about him: the footmarks where the horses of two meeting sleighs had floundered, belly-deep, in snow; the snapped-off ends of an occasional tree beside the roadway; the fenced-in squares of thinner ice, left by the cutters of the week before; the monstrous pile of hummocks which rose against the northern sky like the battered wall of some huge palace of the ice-king. Then, walking still more slowly, he bent his head to watch the devious trail of little bird-tracks, a broken row of dainty, pointed stars imprinted in the freshly fallen snow of the preceding day. In all the hugeness of the vacant landscape, in all the frozen, lonely majesty of the northern winter, the foot-prints, tiny against the immensity that lay around them, seemed, to Tremaine's mind, a curious touch of warm and sensate life left on the face of nature, cold, lonely and inanimate.

And yet —

He shrugged his shoulders and buttoned his fur-lined coat more closely. After all, the face of nature was not one whit more lonely than his own life, scarcely one whit more cold. What then? But there was no vitalizing touch upon his life. At least, none that was not altogether superficial. The question was, would it ever come? Not likely. He, Bernon Tremaine, had never been intended by his Maker to get into the very heart and core of human things. No matter! He shrugged his shoulders again. It was something to be young, alert of brain, and sufficiently able-bodied to enjoy the being up and doing on the ice in such a day as that. Let him take what comfort from it he was able, instead of wasting all his energy in wailing for the unattainable which, very likely, if it were attained, would

turn to dust and ashes in his fingers. He shrugged himself more closely into the lining of his coat, quickened his stride and once more bowed his head to meet the rising gale.

How long he plodded on, that time, he did not know. By sheer force of will, he had put his thoughts behind him, put them quite away. With the zest of an eager boy, he once more was throwing himself completely into his battle with the coming storm which glowered down at him from the thick, dun sky above, which roared at him in the blustering wind. Now and then, he lifted his head a little to watch the soft, powdery snow come skittering towards him above the icy crust which lay beneath, or to measure his progress by the changing angles between the Gothic spires of Beauport church. Then he bowed his head again and plodded on, every fibre of his body tense to face the wintry blast, every nerve within him tingling and throbbing with the fierce joy of its impact.

His head bowed low, he could not see the road for twenty feet before him; but now, above the noisy wind, he could make out the approaching song of bells. Something in their cadence caught his ear. They lacked the monotonous jangle of a smoothly jogging sleigh; on the contrary, they came to him in a series of irregular clashes, like orchestral plunges into a sea of silence. He looked up. Not far across the ice, something else was plunging, too. He could see the leaping of a fretted, half-broken, half-driven horse along the road, rough, and crossed with many *cahots*. He could see the sleigh behind, bumping and skidding and tilting drunkenly about from side to side beneath the slight weight of its sole occupant, a woman, to judge by the colour of her

hat, and, unless Tremaine's eyes mistook him, not on the driver's seat at all, but smothered in the rugs behind. However, before he had time even to question the veracity of his sight, the inevitable had already happened. The low sleigh tilted yet more drunkenly than ever, righted, tilted again; then rolled completely over on its side, landing its occupant, fur rugs and all, in an ignominious heap, half buried in the snow. An instant later, Tremaine leaped to one side, just in season to let the maddened horse go dashing past him, dragging the fragments of the sleigh behind.

"Now please don't go and say 'I told you so,'" a voice remonstrated, as Tremaine, a moment afterward, began his excavations in the mingled heap of snow and rugs.

From sheer astonishment at the unexpected greeting, Tremaine allowed the corner of the topmost rug to fall back again from his hand.

"I — I beg your pardon."

"I hope you do," a muffled voice said petulantly. "You seem altogether bent on smothering me, and it's not nice manners at all." A hand pushed the rug aside, and then the owner of the hand, struggling into a sitting posture, faced Tremaine with merry, pale brown eyes which would have been curiously like his own, had it not been for the difference in expression.

Hastily Tremaine held out his hand to help her to her feet.

"I fear I am very stupid," he said penitently.

The answer caused him a second wave of astonishment.

"I fear you are," the girl assured him serenely, while she totally ignored his outstretched hand. "Still, I

admit I may have been a little unexpected. And yet, after all, I might have expected it, too. Retribution always falls on the naughty little girls who run away and go out sleighing, on Sunday afternoons."

In the face of this astounding vision of a young girl who, fresh from a dangerous accident, sat there tranquilly in a snow bank and talked nonsense at him, Tremaine sought to get hold of the nearest concrete fact.

"Where is your carter?" he asked, and, by reason of his own amazement, his voice and manner were more stern than he was quite aware.

The girl straightened up her toque with two slim, gloved hands, while Tremaine's quick eye noted that the gloves were no fit protection for the northern winter.

"Carter!" she echoed. "Does the man think I am a load of coal?"

"Your driver, then," Tremaine corrected shortly. "Here! Take these." And he tossed into her lap the extra mittens he always carried in an inner pocket to have ready for possible emergency.

With the intent face of a mischievous child, she drew the mittens over her slender hands, then held up the shapeless resultant paws and wagged them slowly before his eyes.

"Are n't they pretty? But what will you do? Oh, you have some others. Then thank you. I am glad of them, even if they do pinch a little. Still, I suppose it won't do any especial harm, as long as the blood can circulate." Apparently she lost herself, for a moment, in rapt contemplation of the wagging mittens. Then she dropped her hands into her lap, and looked up at him alertly. "Oh, the driver? I beg your pardon. I forgot. I spilled him off, a mile or two or three up the

road. He was n't of much use, though; he was too much intoxicated for that." And, lowering her merry, mocking eyes, she resumed her delighted contemplation of the mittens.

During the space of a prolonged silence, Tremaine contemplated her. She had been landed at his feet so unexpectedly; she was so astoundingly composed about it all; she was so marvellously incurious about his personality and about the manner of his appearing to her rescue. To all seeming, the being dumped out of a wrecked sleigh into the middle of the ice-locked Saint Lawrence might have been a mere matter of her day's routine. As a rule, Tremaine was quick to think in an emergency; but now his thinking powers were paralyzed by the absolute and unruffled calm of this unheralded young woman.

"What," he even stumbled over the brief question; "what do you think you'd better do?" he asked, with a feeble impotence that, hours later, caused him to gnash his teeth and search the corners of his memory for potent expletives.

The girl looked up demurely.

"Sit here in the snow, till you either pull me up, or else go quite away. Getting myself out alone is n't going to be graceful — Oh, thank you very much."

As she stood beside him in the road, shaking her garments into position and once more straightening her toque, Tremaine looked at her with a curiosity which was natural and wholly human. An American from her speech and bearing, she was obviously cultivated, obviously a child of riches. Her accent betokened the one fact no less surely than her long coat of the finest seal and the lines of her snug little red toque betrayed

the other. She was not pretty in the very least; but, from a certain unconscious consciousness of manner, it was plain that she was quite accustomed to being considered altogether charming. And Tremaine, standing there and watching her, confessed to himself that he shared the general belief.

"Now what?" she asked composedly, as soon as she had finished preening her ruffled plumage.

Tremaine glanced backward over his shoulder, in the direction of the vanished horse.

"I'm afraid you'll have to walk home," he said, with evident regret.

Her glance followed his around the empty, ice-locked landscape.

"Really, I don't see much else to do. However," her eyes laughed into his, as he fell into step beside her; "don't let me take you out of your way."

"You can't. There is n't but one; that is, until we reach the shore."

"How far is it?" Her accent was a little dubious.

"A good four miles," he told her grimly. "You see, you had your spill at about the farthest possible point from anywhere."

"It always happens just like that with me," she assured him, with a cheery sort of pessimism. "I'm quite used to it by now. It is n't just that my doll insists on leaking sawdust; but the sawdust always falls into my plate of plum pudding and spoils the taste of that. Where do you suppose the horse is now?"

"Down below Rimouski, to judge by the rate he was going, when he whizzed past me. What frightened him, in the first place?"

"I did," she confessed impenitently, as the dimples

came into view beside her lips. "I'd lost off the driver — teamster, as you call him — and he kept going nearer and nearer the edge of the road, so at last I threw my muff at him, to see if I could n't scare him back into the road. Of course, I mean the horse, not the teamster," she added nonchalantly, while she glanced on at Tremaine's side.

He nodded, marvelling the while, how she could find breath to keep up her stream of chatter in the teeth of such a wind.

"Did it?" he asked.

"It scared him not into the road, though, but out of his wits. I think he took it for a species of hairy pterodactyl, from the way he made off. It was a perfectly good muff, too; I really grudged the having used it to such slight advantage."

"We may find it again. It can't have been too far from here."

"No; but far enough." She shook her head, as she attacked his idiom. "Most things are far enough, up here. I never saw anything so rich in spaces as your landscapes are. I noticed it, all the way up, yesterday."

"You are a stranger here?" Tremaine smiled at himself for putting such a banal question.

"Yes. I've been all over the world, and now I've come out of it," she answered, with a callous disregard for Tremaine's local pride.

Instead of feeling proper sense of injury, however, Tremaine merely laughed. If Fate had only given him a sister, he could have fancied her like this girl whose very irresponsibility matched the tingle that came into his own veins at times.

"Before you leave us, you may like to annex this, as a new province of your world," he suggested.

"Heaven forbid! Still, at least, it's charmingly unhackneyed in the way it goes about its social introductions," she observed, with a thoughtful glance at her mittens. "Does it always happen this way; or does it depend a little on the handy ministrations of your — teamster?"

But Tremaine was deaf to the mocking stress she laid upon her mismatched local epithet. Instead, his voice and manner roughened with the brand-new fear suggested to him indirectly by the cavernous gray mittens.

"What have you got on your feet?" he demanded sharply.

For one instant, the girl blushed and stiffened slightly. Then, as she looked into his face and saw that no liberty had been intended, a fresh fit of waywardness descended on her.

"Toes," she told him literally. "Why? Am I not keeping up with you?"

The sharpness increased a little.

"I mean your shoes," he told her curtly. "Really, it's not in the least a joke."

"N-no." Her answer was as quiet as if she had been speaking of a summer dandelion blooming in their path. "I'm quite aware of that, aware of them, too; the toes, I mean. They're very cold."

"Let me see your shoes," he ordered her.

The laugh came back into her eyes, as she obediently halted to balance herself on one foot, while she stuck the other out to view.

"Now shall I reverse?" she asked him meekly, when her manœuvre had been executed.

"No. One is quite enough," he told her, still quite curtly.

"No; it's not. I wish I had a dozen," she contradicted him.

"You are very cold?"

"Y-yes."

"Of course. I might have known it. You Americans never come up here, dressed for our climate. Now, the question is, what is going to keep you from freezing, till I can get you ashore?" Tremaine plunged his fists into his pockets, and whistled at the ice-sheet, while he pondered on the problem which was facing him.

Something else was facing him besides the problem, and the something else refused to take the matter with proper seriousness.

"The hotness of my temper," she answered him flippantly. "However, until it gets to working, do you mind if I walk on ahead, and leave you to meditate at your ease? It is a little bit windy to be standing still."

"Of course. Go on. Trot, if you can. Look! Do this." He set the pace at a short, jogging trot which, imitative as a monkey, she copied to perfection. "I — suppose — you — could n't — wear — my — shoes?" he continued, the trot fairly jouncing the words out of him in gasps.

Still trotting, she cocked her eyes up at him, with more than a gleam of mischief in their yellow depths.

"Why? Do yours pinch, too?" she parried. "I'm sorry; but I know you could n't get mine on, in place of them. Besides, just think of the time we'd waste in changing them about!" And Tremaine forebore to offer further sacrifices.

For full fifteen minutes after that, the girl was silent.

Indeed, it took all of Tremaine's breath and strength to face the cutting, ice-cold wind and he had been accustomed all his lifetime to the rigour of the northern winters. He could only conjecture what of necessity must be the suffering of the girl beside him, transplanted all at once from the warmer climate of the south. What of his mind he could spare from worrying about her, he gave over to admiration of her magnificent pluck, as she trotted on beside him, uncomplaining, indomitable, her trim red toque sadly awry, but the scarlet lips beneath it bravely smiling. Once more he caught himself telling to his other self that, if only he had had a sister —

"Oh, I do wish Don could see me now!" the girl burst out unexpectedly at length, with a little laugh of sheer fun.

"Don!" The word came with all the suddenness of a small explosion.

"Yes. Donald Rhodes, my cousin. I wonder what he would say. He thinks I am safe at the Château, where he left me."

"Where is he?"

If the girl wondered at the abruptness of the question, she was too well trained to show it.

"He went off, directly after luncheon, to hunt up one of his chief cronies here, a Mr. Bernon Tremaine."

"Oh." Then Tremaine rallied swiftly. "I am Bernon Tremaine," he said, as he took off his cap. "And you are —"

For one little moment, the girl hesitated, looking straight into Tremaine's eyes. What she read there seemed to reassure her, for she held out her hand, mitten and all, to his, saying simply, —

"And I am Hilda Lynde."

CHAPTER EIGHT

THAT night, while Tremaine and Donald Rhodes sat talking in the Château drawing-room, Hilda came trailing softly in to join them. Her long, clinging gown made no sound on the thick green carpet. Her light footfall was quite inaudible. Accordingly, she paused beside a sheltering palm, and gave herself over to a deliberate study of the man who, that afternoon, had undoubtedly been her rescuer, not, perhaps, from death, but from an experience which, while it lasted, might have been far more uncomfortable.

Beneath her irresponsible exterior, Hilda Lynde was more than ordinarily quick-sighted. She took that from her father's family, as she took her easy irresponsibility. Her heritage from her mother had lain along quite other lines. Quick-sighted, she needed no outsider to rehearse to her the details of her indebtedness to Bernon Tremaine. From the moment of his tossing the coarse gray mittens into her lap, as she sat there in the snow, up to the time when he had lifted her, much more dead than alive, into a sleigh at the first cabstand inside the city limits: through all this time, his anxiety for her, his practical care over her had never flagged. Moreover, she set it down as distinctly to his credit that Hilda Lynde had had no more of this care than did the unknown young American who had mocked at him

from her heap of rugs and snow. Without him? She shrugged her shoulders at her mirror, as she clasped the chain about her throat. There were some conditions, contrary to fact, that it was never wise to follow out to their logical end. Tossed out into a heap of snow, four miles from anywhere, abandoned to her own resources, thinly shod and girdled and in the face of that bitter, biting wind, what could she have done, alone, to save herself? She could have fought valiantly, but with aimless, futile blows. And, all that long way back into the city, they never once had been within hailing distance of a — What did the man call it, anyway? Teamster? The ready laugh came back into her eyes at the unconscious drollery of the misused word.

From start to finish, he had thought for her, cared for her, had balked her sufferings at every possible point. To be sure, now and then he had shown himself unduly masterful; now and then he had been absolutely mannerless, sometimes from curtness, sometimes from bits of testy temper. The laugh came back again into her eyes. Well, why not? She had teased him mercilessly, had made mocking attack upon his most salient point of all, his watchful care over her. But then, he was a grown man, and not a punky child. There was no especial reason that he should allow the narrow stripe of face, visible to her mocking eyes, to lose all its human interest and turn to a blank, inexpressive wall of nose and lips, just at her friendly chaff.

And yet, all in all, she had liked him, probably from very contrariety of spirit. All her life, all men had bowed to the will of Hilda Lynde. This man was the one exception to the rule. To be sure, the circum-

stances had been as exceptional as was the man himself. Hilda admitted to herself that, during the past afternoon, her will had not been essentially deserving of any worship. All it had accomplished had been the getting her into rather a bad scrape. That done, it had retired impotently to rest, while some one else picked up the fragments of the situation and restored them to their proper places. It had merely added zest to the affair that quite manifestly, albeit within the hidden recesses of his mind, the some one else had waxed a bit profane while he was at his task. To a woman of Hilda Lynde's species, profanity is almost as sweet an incense as is adulation. There had been an occasional gleam in Tremaine's yellow eyes, that afternoon, which held no hint of adulation. Yes, she had liked the man, liked him well.

Halting now in the shadow of the frowsy palm, she took a good, long look at him, as he sat there, talking busily with Don. Dear old Don! What a gentleman he was, and what an altogether darling! Her mind flew off on this parenthesis; then it flew back again to Bernon Tremaine. This was her first good look at him. Out on the ice, and even in the warmer sleigh, he had been furred up to his chin, down to his very eyelids. Now, divested of his furs, groomed with care and clothed in the raiment conventional for his class at the dinner hour, he looked quite a different man, smaller, slighter, infinitely less commanding. Each yellow hair lay decorously in its place; his tie was as impeccable as was the polish of his boots; his accent matched his valeting and his surroundings. Nothing could be more alien to the vision who, wind-blown and alarmed, had met her eyes above the lifted corner of

the black fur rug; nothing less like the man who, before her careless chaff, had poked his fists into his pockets and whistled his perturbation out at the empty landscape.

And yet, he looked every inch a man as he sat there, virile, resourceful, and determined. His rather inexpressive face was aglow with interest, his short-sighted eyes alight with pleasure at Don's unexpected advent. Watching, the girl smiled to herself in sympathetic pleasure. She found him far more likable than ever in this new mood, likable and curiously magnetic as well. The smile still clung about her lips, as she crossed the intervening bit of floor and offered him her hand.

"Don't you think we ought to go back to get those rugs?" she asked him gayly, without preface.

He sprang up, at the sound of her voice in his ears.

"Rested?" he asked her, as he took her hand.

She shook her head.

"I was n't so very tired, only inconceivably mussy. Besides, a rub-down always does wonders for me. And you?"

"I'm all right. Remember I'm used to the climate," he reassured her carelessly.

"But not to rescuing shipwrecked damsels in distress," she reminded him. "Still, I feel I spoiled all the artistic end of the story by my vigour. It would have been so much more seemly to have swooned and lain still like a pallid lily, than to have trudged home against the wind, with my hat askew and my nose the colour of a ripe tomato. It's very ignominious to be an Amazon."

Tremaine laughed.

"What odds, so long as you don't look it?" he returned, with a glance of manifest approval at her slim,

trim figure in its trailing frock. "But really you must be tired. Do sit down."

She waved away the chair he offered her.

"Really I am not. I am worse than that, though, insufferably hungry. Do you mind it, if we go directly in to dinner? I shall talk better, after I've ceased to starve."

And talk she did, fluently and well, while Tremaine proved a close second, as he sat beside her, eating little, as is often the way with healthy men of athletic bent, but alternately answering her and spurring her on to new retort. Opposite them, Don devoured his dinner with a hearty relish, now and then adding a phrase to the talk; but, for the most part, contentedly enjoying the good food and the equally good fashion in which his cousin and his friend were getting on together. Donald Rhodes had no desire to hold his companions for himself alone. Adoring Hilda and liking Tremaine extremely well, he asked nothing better of good fortune than that they two should show out to each other the best of what he knew lay hid within them. And show it out they did, that first night at dinner, while the backlogs crackled in the lofty fireplace, and the polyglot and nimble waiters ran about among the tables, whose glittering glass and silver and resplendent guests looked barbarously modern beside the lords and ladies of the dull-hued tapestry that lined the upper walls.

Later, much later, when Hilda was in her room and in her dressing-gown, and while Tremaine was walking homeward through the softly-falling snow, each one of them was conscious of a curious reaction, as from some excitement they had not heeded while they had been passing through it, an excitement whose sources were

by no means all in the adventure of that afternoon. Totally unromantic, totally, modernly scientific in all their psychological points of view, and one of them at least totally alien to any tendency to analysis of herself or others, each one of them yet held locked inside his mind a vague belief that all their meeting, that afternoon and evening, had been foreordained from the beginning. And yet, their parting held this difference. Tremaine had gone his way out into a night, filled, not with storm, but with a delirious sense of satisfaction, a consciousness that, for the passing hour, he had discovered his point of perfect tangency to the orbit of the human world. He sat up half the night to ponder on the marvel and exult in it, to look forward to its repetition on the succeeding day. Hilda, on the contrary, promptly fell sound asleep, the moment her fluffy head touched the pillow, and, sleeping, her lips were still curved with the smile she had accorded to her last waking memory: Tremaine, his fists stuck in his pockets and his eyes veiled with foreboding, whistling his perturbation out at the empty landscape.

"You appear to be getting your fill of weather, if nothing else," Don told her, as he sauntered up the stairs, next morning, and halted at her side.

Hilda lifted her eyes from the desk where she sat writing letters, and fixed them on the spaces outside the window, just beyond. The spaces were vaguely gray, and spotted with great, soft snowflakes, completely shutting out the river and the hills beyond.

"Poor Uncle Stuart!" she said, with apparent discursiveness.

Don laughed, as he threw himself down into the nearest chair.

"You like this better than the Mediterranean?" he questioned.

"Do I? And, besides, I'm not sent here for my digestion and my nerves," she reminded him. "I honestly think, Don, Uncle Stuart would find this place ever so much better for him than all his cruising in warm waters."

"He does n't appear to think so."

"He does n't know the place."

Don indolently traced the pattern of the cabbage roses in the chair arm.

"Oh, yes; he does," he said at length. "He used to come up here, years ago."

"How strange!" Hilda absently inked in a bandy-legged pig beneath the crowned initial on the hotel paper. Then she added a similar crown to the headpiece of the pig. "How strange!" she repeated, after she had touched up the porcine tail and given it an aristocratic curl. "All last fall, while you were up here, I never could get him to say one word about it."

Don yawned.

"He did n't like it much. I gathered that fact, the only time he ever said anything about it. Come to think of it, though, I gathered that mostly from the things he did n't say. Speaking of not saying things, what did you think of Tremaine, Hilda?"

"Why Mr. Tremaine?" she asked him.

"Because he is such a taciturn sort of beggar, when he chooses. He keeps up no end of a thinking, behind those yellow eyes of his; but I'll be hanged if he ever gives you much benefit of his meditations. I fancy that's the reason I like the fellow so well; he lies low, and leaves me to do all the talking." And Don dis-

misjudged his effort at analysis with a boyish laugh. Then he yawned again. "How are you getting on with those letters?" he asked suggestively.

"I'm not getting on. I only write letters, anyway, when there's nothing else to do, and now I've you to talk to," she answered, with one of the smiles which, long before, had bound Don to her chariot wheel, a willing slave.

Now he laughed, not at the smile, however, but at the words.

"I'll remember that, next time I hear from you. Who gets the letter now?"

"Uncle Stuart. I wonder when he'll get the letter, though."

"It depends somewhat on when you finish it, and also somewhat upon the address you use."

"Naples?"

"Too late to catch him there. They'll be moving farther east. If they do take that long Nile trip, it will be a good six weeks before we can catch him anywhere."

"How can he ever endure it, when his life has been all in Wall Street, ever since we were almost little babies?" Hilda frowned thoughtfully at her pig, which she was now converting to a spotted species.

"He's older than he was, and likewise of more uncertain digestion," Don reminded her. "Those two facts, I should gather from the context, have a tendency to the passive ignoring of most other matters. Dear old Dad! It's going to be hard on him, when he has to give up the reins and sit back and let himself be driven. I'm glad these early symptoms of the coming woe don't seem to put him on his nerves." Don's eyes grew curi-

ously soft and dreamy, as if in response to his own slow words. Then there came a little silence.

It was Don himself who broke it, looking up alertly.

"Finish up your letter, Hilda, and get it off to Naples on the chance."

"There's no hurry," she objected. "I can finish it, this afternoon. How surprised he'll be to hear from us, up here!"

Don ignored the second half of her speech.

"Finish it now, like a good child," he bade her laughingly, as he rose and prepared to move away and leave her to her writing. "This afternoon, we shall be out, doing things."

"Don!" she expostulated. "In all this weather!"

"Up here, nobody ever stops doing things for any sort of weather," he told her. "Besides, Miss Carhart has just telephoned that she is expecting us for tea."

This time, Hilda forgot her pig and, laying down her pen, turned around to remonstrate with him in good earnest.

"Don! But she has n't called on me."

But Don already was making his escape.

"No matter. What difference does that make, anyway?" he demanded backward over his shoulder. Then prudently he vanished down the stairs.

To her extreme surprise, Hilda discovered that it did make singularly little difference when, yielding her usual obedience to Don's wishes, she came inside the firelit glow of the Carhart drawing-room, that afternoon. Allison's personality settled that at once, as well as the quality of Allison's welcome; and, before Hilda quite took in the fact that she was a foreigner and in unfamiliar surroundings, she was being taken out of her

snowy coat and toque, brought forward into the semi-circle of red light before the hearth, introduced to the little group awaiting her and given the tacit freedom of the house. By the time she had ceased to feel surprise at the cordiality of the greeting accorded to her, she also had ceased to wonder why she felt so much at home.

To be sure, Tremaine was there before her; and he gave a touch of familiarity to the group which likewise consisted of Gerrans and the inevitable Aunt who, out of the radius of her niece's charms, was proving herself a young and moderately pretty woman. With one quick glance, Hilda measured her as a potential rival, admitted that she had inherent traits of danger, and detailed Don to keep her amused and out of mischief. Then, with a smile of good fellowship to Tremaine who stood a bit aloof, his eyes bent upon her in grave scrutiny, she sat down, with Allison on one side, Gerrans on the other.

"Yes," she answered to the conventional, tentative remark about the weather; "as Don said, this noon, I am having my fill of it."

"You like it, Miss Lynde?" Gerrans asked her, while he bent forward to wrestle with the forestick.

"It depends a little upon the kind," she told him. "Apparently, though, your climate is bent on showing me all kinds, so that I can make my choice intelligently. You've heard of my adventure, yesterday?" Again her smile sought the face of Tremaine which now, as impenetrable as any sphinx, was bent upon the fire before him.

"No. What was that?" The tongs still in his hand, Gerrans sat up, with every manifestation of eager interest.

But Hilda shook her head.

"How disappointing to my egotism that Mr. Tremaine has n't already told you!" she said, with a little shrug.

"Bernon!" Allison Carhart glanced at the figure who stood slightly in the shadow, his elbow resting on the corner of the mantel shelf. "So you were in it, too? Do give an account of yourself."

"I could n't do it justice. I must leave it to Miss Lynde," he answered unsmilingly.

"Me? I? But I was the heroine; I can't tell it." She tossed the answer back at him merrily. "However, now I think of it, I remember that you were the hero, so it bars you out, too."

"But the story?" Gerrans urged her.

"Must lie for ever buried, for lack of an impersonal narrator. Unless —" again she glanced at Tremaine; "our teamster would do to act in that capacity."

She might as well have glanced at a blank stone wall. Piqued, she turned all her attention upon Gerrans who, nothing loath, completely abandoned the Aunt to Don's tender mercies.

"Did you hear about our other adventures, coming up?" she asked him.

His question promptly crossed the trail of her own.

"Do you always have adventures, Miss Lynde?"

"Always. I like them. When they don't happen, I go out and manufacture them to order."

Allison moved her chair a fraction nearer, and offered a place in the circle to Tremaine.

"How do you accomplish it, Miss Lynde?" Gerrans was asking.

"I merely go to work to perform the unexpected. Usually the Fates are kind enough to follow up my suit and take the trick."

"I thought the Fates were wholly domestic, and used shears," Allison corrected.

"That was before they took to bridge, like every other woman," Gerrans assured her, in a swift aside.

"And the stakes are —?" Hilda held her query in suspension.

"Ask Tremaine," Gerrans suggested. "He ought to know about bridges and stakes; he's an engineer."

Tremaine, however, was sitting, silent and apparently inattentive, beside the unprotected elbow of the Aunt. Gerrans in his turn, accordingly, gave up the effort to attract him to their corner of the group.

"We are thirsting for the tale of the adventures, Miss Lynde," he urged.

She laughed as lightly as if his figure filled the whole stretch of her mental landscape. Then she turned more directly to include Allison in their talk.

"The new Canadian Odyssey?" she said carelessly. "Really, Mr. Gerrans, you must get a great deal of amusement at the serious way we others take your winter. However, we all come out to hunt it, like any other big game. And it is very, very big. One of your days would stock a whole winterful of weather in New York. But, about last Saturday, we were nine hours late, stuck in a monstrous drift, without a thing in sight to eat, except one lonesome farmhouse."

"Did it taste good?" Gerrans demanded hungrily.

Hilda considered, her eye on the approaching tray.

"N-no. At least, not in comparison with some other things," she said suggestively at last. "Of course, the amount of appetite made some difference. I was the only woman in the sleeper, so I had the only pair of snowshoes. The conductor hired them from a

champion something in the other car. He was a very snippy champion, too, all badge and blue clothes, and he would n't show me how to use them."

"Who did?"

"The light of faith, plus the conductor," she answered, as she took her cup of tea. "Anyway, I walked all the way to the farmhouse on them, without a single fall."

"R-re-markable, Miss Lynde." Gerrans stirred his tea tranquilly, notwithstanding the fervour of his tone. "Have a bun," he added. "They're any amount better than the toast. Miss Carhart is a genuine woman; she always tries to hold back the best of things until the last of things."

"As Miss Lynde is doing with her story," Allison interpolated. "What happened at the farmhouse?"

Hilda laughed.

"The absolute anticlimax of every happy ending. I found things to eat there and likewise I ate them."

"Was that all? What utter anticlimax!" Gerrans protested. "But did n't it occur to the conductor chap that it was a part of his job to bring you the things to eat?" And he suited the action to the word by passing the toast plate to the Aunt.

Hilda set down her cup.

"Mr. Gerrans, when I am busy, having an adventure, I prefer to be allowed to work it out, without any sort of masculine interference," she said distinctly, albeit without a glance towards Tremaine.

However, not a flicker of a yellow eyelash betrayed that he heard or, hearing, heeded. Allison, though, both heard and heeded, and she judged that it would be well to change the balance of the little group.

"Bernon," she said decisively; "would you mind hunting up Marie and asking her to bring some more hot water? I want to talk to Miss Garthwaite about our sliding party for to-morrow night." And, as he rose to do her bidding, she took possession of his abandoned chair.

By the time the talk had centred in the general discussion of the next night's plans and settled back into duets once more, Hilda allowed herself to become aware that Tremaine was beside her. Even then, however, she accepted the fact with a temperate degree of joy, and discoursed to him sedately about the latest regulations of the subway, and the new Belgian violinist. Only when she rose to go, did her eyes seek his, with any of their old frankness. Then, as once before, she caused him to gasp with his astonishment.

"Are n't you sorry yet that you snubbed me?" she asked him gayly, in a swift aside. "If you are, you may come and smoke with Don, to-night; and perhaps I may be in the drawing-room, a little later, if I get my letters done in time." And, with the gesture of a petulant spoiled child, she held out her hand to him, before she turned to Gerrans who stood waiting with her coat.

And Tremaine came. Later, upon thinking the matter over, he wondered why he had done it.

CHAPTER NINE

"**W**HAT is the prison, over across the street?" Hilda asked, as carelessly as Don had done before her.

Gerrans looked up from the knot he was tying in the string of her moccasins.

"That's no prison; that's the Hôtel-Dieu," he told her.

"What is that?"

"A hospital. It's run by cloistered nuns."

Hilda shrugged her shoulders.

"Same thing," she said a little bit disdainfully.

Gerrans sat back on his own smutty moccasins and laughed up into her disapproving face.

"You don't feel a vocation, then?" he asked her.

"Vocation, no. Vacation, rather," she corrected.

Tremaine's low voice cut in upon their talk.

"Not much vacation, Miss Lynde," he told her gravely. "Those Hôtel-Dieu nuns are as busy as they are efficient."

She dismissed the interruption with a careless question, —

"How do you know what they are doing, shut up inside those walls?"

And Tremaine, perforce, was answerless.

"Oh, you can see them, when you go inside, Miss

Lynde," Gerrans told her, as he attacked the lacings of the second moccasin. "It's vastly picturesque, too, like rows of white-robed angels hovering above the beds, the things we used to sing about on Sunday afternoons, when we were young. To be sure, those angels usually carried harps, not spoons and glasses and basins of gruel. There! Does that feel right?"

Hilda eyed her feet with extreme disfavour.

"They feel all right," she assured him, with a strong accent on the verb; "but they look like a pair of immense yellow pumpkins. In fact, I seem all feet."

"You'll get used to them in time," he consoled her.

"Oh, I hope not. I should hate to have my taste so modified as not to mind them," she responded hurriedly. "It would be like feeling affection for a wen, or for a chromo, or for any other horror. Let's hope the tint of them will subside a little from this insane orange. Else, they will end by producing self-hypnosis." For a moment, she sat motionless, contemplating her brand-new moccasins with an unalloyed horror which was by no means all assumed. Then, "But, if they're cloistered, it really is a prison," she said irrelevantly at length.

"A voluntary one," Tremaine said, still with the same gravity which, a few moments before, had seemed to her so unsuited to the mood of the group about them.

"But a prison, just the same," she persisted. "Can you fancy any one you know, any woman, shutting herself up for life in such a way as that, Mr. Tremaine?"

He fenced with her question; but even his fencing was grave.

"Men never are supposed to understand you women, Miss Lynde."

She caught somewhat of his gravity into her own mood.

"You do, though, now and then; better sometimes than we understand ourselves," she told him slowly.

"Not often."

"No. That is why we notice it, when it does happen, I suppose," she said reflectively, so intent upon her passing interest in the question that, for all the effect upon her of the chattering group across the room, she and Tremaine might once more have been standing alone upon the ice-locked river. "But, about the nuns: I can't imagine it at all, the mood that leads a woman to cut herself off from life."

"It depends —" Tremaine changed the form of his phrase. "Does n't it depend a little on what it is you mean by life?"

She flashed upon him a swift glance, half of scrutiny, half apologetic.

"You are Catholic, Mr. Tremaine? Forgive —"

Hurriedly he forestalled the finish of her words.

"I am farther from Catholicism than any one like you can measure, Miss Lynde, so far that I am rather in the chaos, outside of all belief. I wish I were n't; but I can't seem to get back inside again."

"Then why did you go out, in the first place?" she asked a little shortly, for, to her well-groomed theology, one's orthodoxy was merely a matter of one's own volition.

Only his eyes showed his pain, as he answered, with a directness curiously uncharacteristic of him, —

"I could n't help myself. It's in my blood, I sup-

pose; I've got to see all sides of things, before I can choose where I will stand."

"And in this?" Her question came more gently, for Hilda Lynde was too much a woman not to be aware that the mood of the confessional came only rarely to the man beside her.

"This time, I stepped a little bit too far. I went over the edge, and I have been slipping there, ever since."

She caught his little allegory quickly.

"And is n't there any one on top to fling you a life-line?" she asked him.

For a moment, he looked at her intently.

"A good many have tried," he answered then; "but the lines were all too slender." Then he dismissed the allegory. "About the nuns, Miss Lynde: I am not sure that I wonder at your not understanding them. As for me, I've lived here always in this Catholic city; all my life, I've seen it going on around me, and it seems more or less a matter of course."

"Perhaps." Hilda appeared to be pondering the question. "Have you ever talked to a nun?" she asked at length.

"Yes, often."

"But humanly, I mean, as a personal equation, the way you would talk to me?" she insisted.

"Yes." Tremaine smiled at the naïveté of the question.

"And did she seem —"

"Well?"

"Quite human?" the girl asked conclusively.

This time, Tremaine's smile held no trace of thoughtfulness.

"Decidedly so," he told her.

"What did you talk about?"

The laugh left his eyes, and a faint colour crept into his cheeks.

"All sorts of things." Then he glanced suggestively at the group across the room. "I wonder if the others —"

But Hilda ignored the thinly veiled hint. As guest of honour for the evening, she felt that the others might wait upon her own good time. Besides, she still had things to say, to ask. As always, Bernon Tremaine was interesting her intensely; she wished to carry on the present conversation, less for its subject than for the sake of getting his point of view.

"You really think, then," she pursued a bit remorselessly; "that you can understand these women in their shutting themselves away from everything that counts in life?"

"But they claim that they are shutting themselves away from everything except what really does count in life," he argued.

She faced him sharply.

"They say. But do you believe it?"

He hesitated. Then, —

"In some cases — yes," he assented.

"But think what they are giving up!" she urged.

"They say they gain more than enough to make up for all that."

Hilda pondered. Then she attacked a fresh phase of the subject.

"It's nothing but unmitigated selfishness," she burst out a little hotly.

For an instant, Tremaine's eyes lay full on hers;

and in their depths was the look of a faithful dog who comes to press his nose against one, in a wordless demand for sympathy and comprehension. Then his eyes dropped to his hands which were busy with the fringe of the gaudy sash that lay across his knee.

"Selfishness?" he echoed; and it was only a good deal later that Hilda bethought herself of the utter lack of opposition in his tone.

Now, however, she was too much in earnest to heed inflections.

"Yes, selfishness. When things go wrong, it must be the easiest thing in the world to pull one's self up by the roots and be transplanted into a sort of spiritual hothouse, with a gardener standing by to pull up all the weeds that get in the way of one's growth. And everybody else does seem a good deal of a weed now and then," she added, in a wayward outburst of frankness.

Again his eyes met hers, this time in perfect understanding.

"You, too?"

"Of course. Everybody does, sooner or later," she answered, heedless of her muddled rhetoric. "The only difference is, we don't all take our sprouts for cuttings from the root of holiness, and go and be a nun. Mr. Tremaine, do you suppose there is a single one of those nuns who is n't shut up in there because she lacked the sense of humour to get on with her own bad tempers?"

"I do," he told her, with a slow earnestness which seemed to force the answer from him a little bit against his will.

"I don't, then. I believe that, if every single one of them had had the grit to hang on to the best end of her situation, she would be a free and useful woman now."

"They are useful," he defended them.

Her lip curled.

"Yes, in a caged-up, artificial sort of way. Mr. Tremaine," bending forward, her elbows on her knees and her chin resting on her fists, she contemplated her yellow moccasins with unseeing eyes: "do you mean that you think — think *nunning* is ever justifiable?"

"Yes. Now and then. Not often."

"I don't." Then she lifted her eyes and fixed them on his face so steadily that she could not fail to see him flinch at her next question. "Mr. Tremaine, has it never occurred to you to think about the families, the brothers and sisters and mothers, perhaps even the little, little children that those women have left behind?"

"Oh, Hilda!" Don's gay voice cut in, before Tremaine could answer. "Has it never occurred to you that we were invited to go sliding, and that we'd like to start in season to get back in time for breakfast?"

And Hilda recalled herself swiftly from her impersonal interest in the nuns to the more personal matter in hand. Rising, she joined the general group across the room; and, as she did so, she looked back to speak again to Tremaine. To her surprise, Tremaine had vanished out of sight and out of speaking distance.

The party, that night, had been Allison's plan. Experience of many years had taught her that there was no way easier of breaking down the barriers of formality than by an evening at the Falls, no way easier of proving, for future social use, which of the new-comers would be usable for sports and which for looking artistic and for drinking tea. Now and then, she discovered a recruit who excelled in both lines; but that was rare. Meanwhile, however, she employed

the Falls slides as a species of touchstone. Tonight, the party was a small one, one on whose local members she could place absolute reliance not to introduce inharmonious comparisons of racial preference. She had included, besides the two Americans, a little English lawyer who, at a first glance, seemed chiefly to consist of large round spectacles, a pretty, red-haired girl whom Allison could safely trust to amuse Don while she broke him into the somewhat complicated trick of steering, Gerrans and the attendant Aunt whose niece by now had fallen into complete oblivion, Bernon Tremaine and herself. She had counted that, next to the Americans, Tremaine would be her chiefest care. He had manifested no reluctance over accepting her invitation. Nevertheless, he had already privately recorded his adverse opinion of the red-haired Ethel Cameron; he had disregarded the Aunt as a thing of no account, and Allison's own observations of the day before had caused her some dubiousness as to the future path of his acquaintanceship with Hilda Lynde. She had breathed a sigh of absolute relief, that night, during the interval while Hilda and Tremaine had sat and amicably talked apart; and she had done her hostess's best to prolong that interval to its fullest limit.

As a matter of course, the little party had assembled at the Carharts'. Not only was Allison the hostess; but the two Americans already had learned their way to the place which, moreover, was on the direct road to the Lontmorency station. There had been a halt for the needful introductions, for what had seemed to Allison a wholly superfluous cup of tea, and for the rehabilitation of her feet which, Gerrans had protested,

were in no fit state of protection to endure the evening's sport. Accordingly, he and Allison had taken Hilda in hand, while the lawyer, Fordyce, who, it appeared, roomed somewhere in the neighbourhood, vanished in company with Don. When they reappeared, a little later, Don wore the self-conscious smirk of the would-be actor, the first time he beholds himself in costume. As he also wore a scarlet knitted tuque, tasselled like a nightcap, and scarlet stockings drawn up far above his knees, the cause of his self-consciousness was obvious to the eye of his critical cousin who, meanwhile, was making futile attempts to conceal beneath the short skirt of her walking costume the pumpkin-hued budgets which answered for her feet.

"There's only one thing to console us, Don," she murmured in his ear, as they left the house. "We're neither one of us in a position to tell tales of the other."

Gerrans placed himself beside her, as they reached the street, placed himself there with an air of masterful permanency which caused the Aunt to elevate her chin and fall back upon the society of Fordyce. This was the Aunt's first winter in the city. By another year, she too would have learned to watch with cynical amusement the ceaseless ebb and flow of the tide of Gerrans's somewhat peripatetic affections. Viewed with a proper amount of perspective, Gervase Gerrans was the delight of all his friends. Now and then, however, the perspective was lacking; and, under those conditions, the delight speedily turned to woe. With the Aunt, perspective lacking, woe dated from that night. Accordingly, she fell back on Fordyce, who received her with a philosophic calm. She was a bit exuberant;

but also she weighed a good eleven stone, he calculated swiftly. With her for ballast, even a little man like himself might hold his own in sliding races. Hilda, at ninety-seven pounds, would be a far less desirable companion. And, after all, it was sliding which was before them, that night. Later, if they went inside to dance, he would pass the Aunt on to young Rhodes who, despite his slimness, looked exceedingly muscular. Thus did Fordyce employ his analytic legal mind in seasons of pure frivolity. Needless to say, he emerged from every function, content by reason of the good time he had had, and consequently amiable. Hence came his popularity, a popularity which had nothing at all to do with his good breeding and his equally good record in his difficult profession.

As for the red haired Ethel Cameron, she had been privately instructed by her hostess that on no account was she to allow Donald Rhodes to go down the slides alone, until she judged it safe. For reasons connected with the city's reputation, Allison objected to broken bones on the part of guests. For residents, it was an entirely different matter.

Six times, then, Don and Ethel made the round trip of the slides. Half way through the seventh circuit, however, Don felt himself called upon to remonstrate.

"I say," he protested; "have n't I had about enough of this thing, Miss Cameron?"

Purposely she misunderstood him.

"Are you so cold as all that? Perhaps we'd better go inside the house, then."

"Hang it! You know what I mean," Don assured her, with a wrathful lack of manners. "How long are you going to keep on sliding me down these things?"

"As long as you enjoy it," she replied demurely, as she halted at the foot of the higher slide.

"But I don't," Do blustered. "I'm an able-bodied man; I don't want to be trundled about by a girl, all the evening long. I beg your pardon," he added hurriedly. "Of course, that's not a pretty-mannered way to put it. But then —"

Under the electric lights beside them, Ethel Cameron's face smiled calmly back at him from beneath her aureole of flaming hair.

"Then?" she said encouragingly.

Don turned to wheedling.

"Then why won't you sit on in front, this time, and let me do the steering?"

"Because I value my own neck," she answered, with uncompromising frankness.

"I won't spill you off," he urged her.

His urging was in vain.

"No. I don't intend you shall. I have an aged mother at home, dependent on my society. She would n't like it, if you —"

"But I won't."

"Did you ever steer a sled on ice?"

"No; but —"

"Well?"

"I can."

"In time, perhaps."

"Now. Will you come?"

She shook her head.

"Then —" He lifted up his voice. "Hilda!"

"Yes," came the voice from up above him, where Hilda was awaiting her turn, with Gerrans standing by her side.

"Wait till I get up there. I'm going to take you down, this time."

"Take Tremaine," Gerrans advised him tranquilly, from over his shoulder. "Miss Lynde is too valuable to be the victim of a spill."

"Don won't spill me. I know him better than all that," Hilda retorted, with equal tranquillity. "Besides, there's a special providence that watches over sinners. Ready, Don? All right."

But Tremaine had drawn back his own sled, already poised at the very verge of the steep slope.

"Don't!" he said, with brief decision. "Really, it's better not, Miss Lynde. You're not enough accustomed to it yet, yourself. If anything should happen, you might get panicky, and that would make things a good deal worse."

Seated now on Don's sled, she looked up at Tremaine with a wilful little laugh of opposition.

"Do you think it's my habit to get panicky?" she demanded.

Without an instant's pause, he answered her.

"No; I don't. All the more reason I don't want you to break your record now. The time may come when you'll be glad to have it to fall back upon to give you courage."

She had been prepared to be insistent, obstinate. To her own extreme surprise, she found her opposition yielding to his quiet will. Before she had a chance to test the sincerity of her yielding, Tremaine spoke again, still with decision.

"Gerrans, if you'll look out for Miss Cameron, I'll leave Allison here with Miss Lynde, and let Rhodes take me down a time or two, until he gets the trick of

steering." And, with an assurance that gave no chance for opposition, he held out his hand to assist Hilda to her feet. "You don't mind?" he added questioningly.

Her answer came with the frankness which, he was beginning to learn, was her most winning characteristic.

"No; I don't. But really I don't see why I don't," she told him.

He smiled back at her, as he packed himself into a ball on the front of Don's sled and sat there, waiting for Gerrans to get out of their way.

"Because you are saving yourself, unbroken, for my turn to slide with you, and -- for a few other things that may come after," he answered her whimsically, just as they slipped away.

Of course, there was the first successful slide, the equally successful return. Beginners' luck sees to that, whatever the sport. Don came back, vaingloriously radiant and boasting, to the top of the larger slide, and offered to take down any or all of the girls at once. Gerrans scoffed audibly, and advised him to confine his attentions to Tremaine, so once more the two men sped away together, diving down the steep incline, and flying out along the ice at the foot of the slide. This time, however, there came the equally inevitable spill, a slithering, skidding spill that left two figures lying stunned upon the ice, and sent Gerrans and Fordyce rushing to the rescue.

On the heels of the rescue, Ethel Cameron came in strongly.

"Might I be permitted to inquire," Don queried, as he stanchd the life-blood on his left cheek bone; "if you generally carry a surgical kit about with you, Miss Cameron?"

She looked up composedly from the strip of plaster she was fitting to the hole in Tremaine's forehead.

"Not always, Mr. Rhodes. I had it, this time, because I knew you would n't be contented until you had broken either your own neck, or somebody else's." Then, heedless of Tremaine's waiting countenance, uplifted meekly to receive the plaster, she smiled down upon the other half of her dispensary. "I know all about it," she added; "because, you see, I've been through the same thing, myself."

And Don's adoration of Ethel Cameron dated from that hour.

Hilda, meanwhile, a little white about the mouth, sat apart in a snowbank and watched operations.

In the general excitement, no one had thought to look after her, no one had remembered that, to her unaccustomed eyes, a mere commonplace spill would seem a genuine catastrophe. Gerrans was the first one to bethink himself of her possible alarm, and, detaching himself from the middle of the group, he went to look her up.

"Party's over," he announced, as casually as if plastered cuts were a matter of every-day occurrence. Then, as he drew nearer, he looked down at her a little narrowly. "I say," he observed, after an instant's silence; "I thought you claimed not to get panicky."

"I don't." Her tone was petulant. "That is, at least, not about myself."

Gerrans laughed in his usual unruffled fashion.

"I must say, you don't look it," he assured her.

Impatiently she brushed his words aside, as if they, or their subject, were not worth the heeding. Instead, --

"I wish you would stop laughing, and tell me if he 's very badly hurt," she demanded, still impatiently.

It was not until an hour later, though, that she remembered to assure herself that, in spite of the fact that Tremaine had been hidden from her by the others of the group and Don had been directly in her line of vision, her question had, must have had, sole reference to Don.

CHAPTER TEN

NOTWITHSTANDING his belief, both secret and avowed, in the skill of his surgeon of the night before, Don came to breakfast, the morning after the sliding party, with every appearance of being somewhat the worse for wear. Not that there was anything to be wondered at, however, in the general dilapidation of his mood. Even apart from his spill and his consequent bumped anatomy, it was no small strain for any Southerner, however hardy and athletic, to slide for two hours of a winter evening when the mercury stands at minus fourteen, and then, for another hour, to dance over Kent House floor in moccasins. Small wonder that Don looked and felt, as he phrased it, soggy. Hilda, on the other hand, was blazing with vitality. She was so constituted that bodily considerations yielded to her nerves. On several different counts, the previous evening had been a stimulating one.

To be sure, wherever she went, Hilda Lynde had been accustomed to concentrate upon herself a fair share of the general attention. In a demure and wholly wellbred fashion, she had begun to flirt before she was well out of bibs and sashes. That was different, however. The partners of the flirtation had been men of her own country, men who played the game as carelessly as she, but far less well. Up here, it was by no means the same

thing at all. Judged by the standard set by Gerrans, those other men were bunglers in the art of making peripatetic love. They gloried in the very carelessness of their skill; and by flaunting it abroad, by advertising it to the on-looker as a merit, they despoiled the game of half its value. Gerrans, on the other hand, made even his carelessness into a fine art. He covered it up beneath a thick layer of intent devotion, as one covers a jewel up with woolly cotton; he laid stress on its existence by the very completeness of his disregard. Every long, intent glance, every low, eager word seemed seeking to proclaim to the outsider that now at length life had taken on new meaning to Gervase Gerrans; that his long-awaited hour had come at last. The very cleverness of his method betrayed the many years of practice which had gone before. And Hilda, equally proficient, threw herself headlong into the game, delighted that at last she had found an antagonist who would be worthy of her skill. The evening at an end, she went home to lie long awake, plotting new moves; she fell asleep at last, to dream of their successful operation, she waked again, next day, ready to whet her foils anew.

Two members of the little party, however, had gone home in a mood of anxiety over the combination. The Aunt was manifestly cast down and low in her mind. She had found the talk of Fordyce altogether too full of nonsense. She had also found out that a straight-haired woman is distinctly at a disadvantage in a knitted tuque. Hilda's superiority in the eyes of Gerrans the Aunt attributed entirely to the becoming fluff of yellow hair that lay across her forehead, to that and the cocky, roundabout hang of her short skirt. The Aunt's skirt

was a good two inches longer in the rear, and her tuque caused her to resemble a fat little buff pussy in a night-cap. But, alone with her pillow, the Aunt consoled herself with the reflection that the scraps of talk she had overheard from Hilda were trivialities, such as she never would have thought of uttering; that a man like Gervase Gerrans must have been much displeased at the cavalier fashion in which Hilda domineered over him and ordered him about. He was far too much the gentleman to show it, especially to a woman and a guest; but he must have been annoyed by it, all the same. The Aunt laid her cheek upon her feathery confidante, feeling somewhat cheered by her reflections.

Allison, meanwhile, had only one source of uneasiness. Would Hilda take Gerry too much in earnest? Not, however, that she would have minded it in the least if he had been in earnest. At first sight, even, Hilda was more attractive than the Aunt. In fact, it was a peculiarity of Gervase Gerrans that each new star to which he hitched the wagon bearing his affections was brighter than the one before it. It was a peculiarity which might end disastrously for the universal lover, Allison reflected, since it must inevitably lead him up and up along a serried rank of maidens to land him at the feet of some fair, white-robed angel. And not even the most vivid of imaginations could picture Gervase Gerrans and a full-fledged angel drinking ambrosial tea together in serene accord.

Nevertheless, although Hilda had gone to sleep, planning new moves in the game of hearts with Gerrans, before that she had sat long in her room, her wadded dressing-gown wrapped around her, and her feet tucked underneath her in the great easy chair, while she thought

of Fordyce and Tremaine. She had danced three times with Fordyce, that evening; each time she had danced with him, she had liked him better than the time before. To be sure, he was distinctly ugly to look upon; he had the physical charms of a German kobold. At first sight, Hilda had dismissed him from consideration, ranking him as a mere bit of social padding. Later, he had caught her attention by an odd trick of shutting his fist, thumb out, and delivering all his arguments directly at the thumb, as at an unruly child. It was then that, watching him, she discovered that, behind his owlish spectacles, his eyes were shrewd and full of kindly humour, that the wrinkles in his lean face came from excessive nerve vitality, not from less likable cause. Still later, she discovered that, despite his littleness, he danced well; and that, despite his reputed cleverness, he talked adorable nonsense. Then and then only did she take an interest in her first discovery of all, that he was plainly attracted by herself.

Sliding for the most part with Gervase Gerrans, dancing with Fordyce as often as he was able to arrange it, Hilda had had only the most cursory glimpses of Bernon Tremaine. At the entrance to the lift, however, just as they were starting for home, she hung back for an instant to brush the snow from her skirt. When she started on again, Tremaine was at her side. At her side, too, he remained, after they were settled in the car for home. Around them, the others were chattering gayly; but Hilda was unaccountably silent. She was a little tired from the excitement of the evening, a little conscious of the physical relaxation of the warmer air inside the car. Under these conditions, she found the society of Tremaine singularly restful. Beside the

others in the party, he seemed to her an old, old friend, one with whom she could talk or be silent as she chose, relying implicitly upon the understanding he had vouchsafed her more than once already in their brief acquaintanceship.

Sitting in her room, her feet curled under her and her hands clasped at the back of her fluffy yellow head, it was of Bernon Tremaine that Hilda thought the longest. She liked him extremely, had liked him from the first, liked him unaccountably, despite the occasional curt-ness of his manner to her. She shrugged her shoulders scornfully, however, at the notion that she might like him better for his very curtness. That was the attitude of the ingenuous schoolgirl who secretly bedews with tears the pages of such romances as *Jane Eyre*. She was of different mould and training; people attracted her by reason of their Christian graces, not by lack of them. No. She deplored Tremaine's occasional lapses into bad manners, his occasional cubbishness; but her liking downed even her deploring. But why? She pondered the matter long and carefully; then she gave the riddle up, unanswered. It was the old, old case of *Doctor Fell*, only taken in a reverse sense. And, all her life long, she had prided herself upon her immunity from sudden likings. Her circle of acquaintances was large and constantly increasing; her friends all dated back to the early days of dancing-school. Chief of them all was Don, the cousin who shared most of her recollections; for Hilda could remember no past at all prior to her life inside the Rhodes' home. Poor old Don! What a bump he had had, that evening!

The thought brought her back to Bernon Tremaine, and to her unanswered question. Well, why did she like

him so well? Unclasping her hands, she rested one elbow on her huddled knees, then rested her chin upon the narrow margin of palm left by her curled-in fingers. The answer to the question was the answer of the little child: *Be-c-c-cause*. He had never done anything especially likable; that is, nothing beside his care of her upon the ice, and that care had been quite impersonal, the sort of thing one gives to any lost little animal who needs attention. Besides that, he had snubbed her now and then, had argued with her now and then, and once or twice only he had talked fluently, pleasantly to herself and Don. He had taken her down the slide, three times that night, had danced with her once, and, coming home in the car, he had sat beside her in an almost unbroken silence. Surely — Hilda smiled to herself. Surely, measured by normal standards, it was not a remarkable total, nor yet an especially winning one.

On the other hand, though, in all his taciturnity, in all his snubbings and his argument, she gained an odd sense of his complete appreciation of her point of view. Once or twice, he had surprised her by uttering words which already were trembling on her own tongue. Once or twice, even, he had punctuated a long pause by glancing at her in a way which seemed demanding the comprehension which he neither asked nor expected from any one else. Unlike they were, would always be, unlike in nationality, tradition, training; but Hilda Lynde was woman enough to know by intuition that, in the days to come, Bernon Tremaine and she, however they might clash, however they must inevitably drift apart again, yet always and always could count upon a clear understanding, each one of the other. She drew a long breath and leaned back in her deep chair. After

all, it would be rather restful in a sense. With Bernon Tremaine, there would never be any especial need to pose. He would know her through any mask and domino she wore, would recognize her for herself, her restless, wayward, affection-craving self, Hilda Lynde. She wondered vaguely whether his subservience to convention, his indifference were another mask; whether the wearing it chafed him, as hers did now and then chafe her. She even wondered whether the time would come when he would toss the mask aside and show himself to her as he was, shorn of all disguise, the real, true Bernon Tremaine. After all, though, such showing might be death to friendship.

Rising, she began to take the pins out of her hair, while she repeated to herself thoughtfully the trite old lines, —

“‘One day, out of darkness, they shall meet
And read life’s meaning in each other’s eyes.’”

But already in her own eyes there had come a gleam of mockery at her sentimental mood. She flung a hairpin at the mirrored face before her, and capped her lines profanely, —

But, next night, in the dark again they meet
And bump their heads together in surprise.

Then forcibly she detached her mind from Bernon Tremaine, and fell to thinking about Gervase Gerrans. Moreover, so healthy was she and so strong of will that at last she fell asleep, still thinking of him. When a problem was forced upon Hilda Lynde, she went to work to solve it. Otherwise, she let it quite alone.

Don was no faddist; neither was he continental in his habits. Despite his obviously battered condition,

he made a mighty breakfast; and the breakfast cheered him wonderfully. He had almost ceased to be sorry for himself, by the time he laid aside his napkin.

"What's doing, this morning, Hilda?" he queried, as their waiter drew back her chair.

"I'm not sure. What about you?"

"If you won't be too lonely for a little while, I think I'll go hunt up the other victim of the spill, and ask him how he finds himself. You ought to rest up a little, too. You must be infernally tired." But he laughed at the palpable disingenuousness of his own words.

"I'm not. Still, we did n't come up here to stick together like Eng and Chang," she told him. "Go and amuse yourself."

"Sure you won't be lonely?"

"I have untold resources within myself; it's only the mentally incapable who get lonely. And, Don, be sure you tell the other victim that I trust he's on the upward road to health." Then, leaning on the rail above the stairway, she watched her cousin go running down the stairs, watched him and thanked her stars for giving her this jovial, loving Don for cousin and adopted brother. No real, blood-brother could be any dearer, no one more loyal to herself.

According to his spoken word and innate belief, Don had gone forth with every intention of hunting up the other victim. Half-way across the Château court, however, he changed his mind. Instead, he hunted up his last night's surgeon, and spent the morning in her company. Hilda, meanwhile, wrote up her notes, answered a telephone call or two; then, finding the time hang heavy on her hands and tempted by the blue-

white dazzle of the morning, towards eleven o'clock she put on her hat and sallied out alone.

It was her first glimpse of the city in the sunshine; and it dazzled her completely. Never was such blue sky above; never such snow, piled high and white and soft below. The very air seemed crackling with the light that came streaming down upon the gray old city; and the intense, but breezeless, cold stung her into a glow of complete exhilaration and timed her step rather to the state of her own nerves than to the insecure foothold of the trodden ice upon the pavements. New sights met her upon every hand: the great blue gray berlines heaped with snow, the mammoth horse-drawn razor with which men scraped the sidewalks, the very passers-by upon the sidewalks, the women bundles of expensive furs, the men striding along in coonskin coats and pointed caps of krimmer, a levelling sort of costume which makes it wellnigh impossible to differentiate between the ranks of prince and carter. Then a nun came by, gray, black, or white, and then a brown Franciscan friar, his bare feet temporarily eclipsed in boots, and then an officer from the Citadel, transformed by his unbecoming khaki to the likeness of a parboiled baby of malign appearance and dubious extraction. It was all so exotic, all so intensely full of life, all so busy doing nothing in particular but pass the time till spring should come again and restore connection with the outside world; just as busy, she told herself, and as self-centred in its own futility as any ant-hill in the forest.

Nevertheless, it charmed her absolutely; and she walked briskly on, turning this way and that at random, up Louis Street, into quiet Parloir, back to Buade and

then around the rear of the Basilica until, all unexpectedly, she came out on the Grand Battery and halted, astonished, almost awed, at the glory of the view which was spreading out before her. Far down on the horizon, the blue crests of the Laurentides lay like a sapphire chain; nearer, the Canardière flats stretched out, white and flashing in the sun. The great river at her feet flashed, too, not white, but bluely, as the sunshine caught the sheet of sliding, gliding water whose tint was deepened by contrast with the scattered ice floes that went slipping down the stream. And, directly before her, there extended that other arm of the stream, that great ice road up which she had toiled, with Tremaine at her side.

As if her thought of him had evoked his physical presence, his voice fell on her ears.

"Miss Lynde! What luck to find you here!"

Turning, she smiled and nodded at him, as if his sudden coming had been the most natural thing in the world.

"Ditto. I might say. Really, you are the unexpected vision. I thought these were office hours."

"So they are. I had a bit of headache, though, so I left the office to look out for itself."

"The result of last night's spill?" she asked sympathetically, as he fell into step beside her.

"Nothing half so romantic. A habitant sub-contractor came in and smoked at me for an hour, this morning. But then, you don't know the local nicotine, so my excuse won't count for much."

She laughed.

"I'll take your word for it. Meanwhile, how is the broken head?"

"Better."

"Let me see," she ordered, with a little air of ownership which Tremaine felt no desire to cast aside.

Instead, he took off his cap obediently, and turned his laughing face for her inspection.

"It looks very messy," she observed, with candid disfavour. "What have you done with Miss Cameron's fine plaster?"

"I soaked it off." His tone was quite impenitent, as once more he put on his cap.

"What for?"

"I hate fussing. Besides, plasters are always a bid for pity," he assured her. "If you're taking care of yourself, people always feel privileged to ask questions and prescribe things."

"And you don't like it?" She spoke rebukingly, as to the overgrown schoolboy that Tremaine for the moment seemed.

"No; I hate it," he returned healthily. "I loathe a chap that lets himself get knocked out; next to that, I loathe the chap that admits the knock-out, when it comes."

"Hm!" Hilda pondered, while they rounded the angle of the wall and came out upon the Ramparts. "I think I rather like your grit, in theory," she told him then. "Still, for æsthetic purposes, I think I'd stick to plaster."

A gleam of fun came into his eyes.

"The plaster stuck to me, instead. I had the deuce of a time, getting it off. By the way, how is your cousin?"

"Have n't you seen him?" Hilda's voice showed that her astonishment was mingled with some anxiety.

"He started out to find you, a good two hours ago."

"He must have missed his way, then, for he called me up from Miss Cameron's, just as I was starting out."

"From Miss Cameron's?"

"Yes. He probaoly was more biddable than I, and went back to get another plaster. And, by the way again, what became of your vaunted courage, last night?" Tremaine stuck his hands into his pockets and turned to face her. "Really, Miss Lynde, I must say I found it distinctly disappointing, to see you sitting and wailing in the snow bank. You did better than that, last Sunday afternoon."

"Of course I did; that was entirely different. I was the chief victim then; the whole artistic situation depended upon me. Last night, you held the centre of the stage, and you really were a very sanguinary spectacle. Besides," from under the drooping feathers that half covered her wide hat, she shot him a glance of merry question; "is it so very much worse to wail than it is to stick one's hands inside one's pockets and whistle?"

"Guilty," he replied promptly, but with absolute impenitence. "But then, you see, you were so very sudden."

"So were you, last night. All in all, I think ice is made for skating."

"Do you skate?" he asked her quickly.

"Of course. Why not?"

His answer was a bit apologetic.

"I've never been inside the States, you know."

"And your question was first cousin to the old

conundrum about the devil?" she responded, with the flash of daring that came to her now and then. "Yes, I skate. Likewise, I belonged to a girls' hockey team, once on a time."

"Not really?" Then his tone grew even more alert. "And have you ever danced on skates?"

"After a fashion. That is, I waltz, and do things backwards. Why?"

He faced her, with a cool air of proprietorship which seemed to her especially becoming to his whole personality.

"Merely that you are not to make any other engagement for the fifteenth. Our skating club is giving a fancy-dress dance, that night, for some charity or other, and you —"

"I'm not a member of the club," she reminded him.

"You are, if I choose to make you one. Anyway, you are going to do it. The girl I've been practising with is down with some sort of an *itis*, and you will go in her place. You'd hate to see me left out of it, you know," he added, with a tardy effort at persuasion; "and, besides, you never break a promise."

"Not —"

But he cut her off at the very beginning of her phrase.

"Not in all the time I've known you," he insisted.

"And that," she reminded him; "is just four days."

An odd little smile came into his eyes and curved his lips. For the moment, he looked a happy, dreamy boy, as he made answer, —

"On the contrary, I have known you for many gen-

erations, Miss Lynde. I'm a bit of a fatalist, you know."

And, all the rest of the day, Hilda spent her leisure moments in wondering what he meant and why he meant it, wondering still more that she felt neither resentment nor even opposition to his words.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ALLISON CARHART was lunching with Hilda at the Château. By especial invitation, she had come early and had brought with her her embroidery, not the bore-protector, this time, but a brand new piece of all eyelets and stems and little seeded flowers. Don and Bernon Tremaine, the while, had driven out to Cap Rouge. It was a glorious morning, cold and clear, a morning especially made for sleighing; yet it had been a business trip, after all. Tremaine had been ordered to verify some vaguely-phrased report or other about the viaduct. As a matter of course, he had asked Don to go with him.

Don and Hilda had been in the city more than two weeks by now; and the matter-of-courseness of their invitations was increasing fast from day to day. Not only were they free to play at all hours of the day or evening; but they played well, whatever the game of the passing hour. Their enthusiasm was unflagging; their energy kept pace with their enthusiasm. They did all the things they ever had known how to do; they promptly set to work to learn the things they did n't. Just why they failed to break their necks in the process was a secret known only to their Creator, who doubtless had reasons of His own for wishing to be their Preserver as well. To the joy of their asso-

ciates, and to the manifest astonishment of all their elders, they came out from every risk, sound in life and limb and wind. To be sure, Hilda's face resembled a primæval Indian in colour, and she shed occasional chips of skin from her anatomy, by reason of her frequent collisions with the omnipresent ice. To be sure, Don walked abroad, in those latter days, with a purple bruise beside his nose and a conscious care for his left ankle which had twisted a little, the first time he had attempted the ski jump. However, these were mere details, and in no way affected the sum total of their enjoyment.

It was enjoyment, too, enjoyment that crammed their days to overflowing, enjoyment far more wholesome in its simple informality than the routine of mid-winter dissipation to which both Don and Hilda had become only too well accustomed. At home, the main considerations had been what one should wear and to whom one should talk. Up here, one talked haphazard to any one of the dozen people who formed the unchanging nucleus of whatever might be happening; one wore many layers of warm things on top of whatever soft thing would be hurt the least, and one ceased to care about being pressed and curled and fluffed. In fact, how could one care about it, when one was in and out in all sorts of weather; when the evening dance was generally prefaced by a slide, or by a skating party, or a snowshoe tramp? Now and then Hilda tried to imagine one of her friends at home, waltzing in a thin white blouse and short wet skirt and yellow moccasins; but she usually gave up the attempt and at once. For herself, however, it seemed most natural, as natural as it did to come padding home down the Grande

Allée and in across the Château court in those same moccasins and with her snowshoes tucked under her arm, toes upward, while another section of her world was driving about in its best clothes, leaving cards and drinking tea.

It was a busy life into which she and Don had been launched. After their late, lazy breakfast before the crackling fire of the Château dining-room, they plunged into an activity which lasted until bed-time. Luncheon was a movable feast, as regarded time; dinner was also movable, but as regarded space. Everybody they met, asked them to dinner; when that dinner was ended, they were asked to come again. In the first place, this rare hospitality had been justified by the fact that Tremaine's chief, requested to look out for Don, had handed Don over to Tremaine who had introduced him at the Carharts' who — The chain extended to infinity. Later, when Hilda came, and when the season of play had closed in upon the little city, every one held out a welcoming hand to these new playmates, gay, enthusiastic and singularly adaptable as they were. By the end of the second week, Don and Hilda were, to all intents and purposes, corporate members of the younger set.

The set was not large. Small as it was, it had its pith and core. This gave rise to all manner of varying degrees of intimacy. In the last analysis, however, Don's chief allegiance remained, unshaken, at the feet of Bernon Tremaine; while Hilda Lynde found that her own best times centred in Allison Carhart.

No two girls, however, were ever more unlike. In her secret heart, Hilda Lynde rebelled from the strict convention which was the very law of Allison's being.

So far from being limited, Allison Carhart did everything, and did it well; but she did it in a methodical fashion which would have driven Hilda to the verge of frenzy. Allison took even her pleasures a little bit seriously, and laid out her time among them just as her mother organized her charities and her household duties. Hilda, on the other hand, felt that the very joy of pleasures consisted in their unexpectedness. So far as social law allowed, she was chaotic, casual; and, what was more, she gloried in her casualness and fought against the social laws that bound her down to anything approaching system. To Hilda's mind, the unannounced extras were always the best part of any dancing party. Allison, on the other hand, was mildly worried, unless her programme was filled out in good season. In character, the same dissimilarity existed. Allison was like the west wind, strong, steady and full of healthful stimulus. Hilda was like a summer tempest which came from nowhere, blew all ways at once and departed at full speed towards the unknown, leaving a gasping world behind. However, upon occasion, the world dearly loves to gasp. Allison was strong and sane and helpful; but Hilda, helpful as a fluffy marmoset, was more interesting far to watch and even, now and then, to play with.

As usually happens, however, friendship was founded upon unlikeness. Of all the girls whom she had ever met, Hilda found Allison the most restful, the most reliable; to no one else would she have gone more quickly in case of any trouble, no other girl's advice would she have deigned to think of taking. Allison's advice she would have taken unhesitatingly, granted that she had been driven into asking it. However, as a rule, Hilda

Lynde was not prone to ask advice. Beneath her fluffy yellow hair was a shrewd, logical brain. She thought out her own problems to her own solutions. At least, she always had thought them out. Still, one never could foretell the future, and it was good to have a friend at hand to be relied upon in case of need. To be sure, there was always Don; but then, though, she had heard it said that men did not count for much in times of crisis. As for her aunt, Don's mother, she was too flaccidly invertebrate, too lacking in all humour to be one's confidante. What could be expected of a woman who sent a maid out to her little son, playing marbles in the street, to ask if he were not tired, or needing a slice of cake? She would be sure to interrupt a halting, blushing confidence by queries as to nerves and *nux vomica*. But Allison was different. One could always tell her things, sure that she would wait, interested, but offering no comment, until the story was completely finished. And Hilda only forebore to put her theory to the test by reason of her lack of anything especial to confide. None the less, it was a comfort to know that Allison was there.

And Allison? She loved the wayward, merry young American without a trace of logic, loved her, not so much for her qualities as for her charming, irresponsible little self. And yet, by reason of her love, she believed that she saw deeper down into Hilda's nature than did the other girls around them; saw there, beneath the waywardness, the irresponsibility, certain fine cords of inherent strength which would one day tighten to meet and to withstand the strain that life might put upon them. Meanwhile, after her own quiet, steady fashion, she revelled in Hilda's effervescent chatter,

revelled in the glimpses of an unknown world revealed by Hilda's every word and act. In comparison with the modern-novel setting of Hilda's life, Allison's existence seemed to herself as calm and simple as a German fairy tale by Grimm. She had no especial desire to pose as the heroine of the novel; but it was rather charming to talk to some one else who could so pose.

And talk the two girls did, incessantly and with interest, whenever they could be alone together. One fact was always notable, however. Often as Allison might start the conversation towards Hilda's New York life, the course of their talk always deflected gently, but steadily, until it came back to Quebec once more, with Hilda listening and putting questions, and Allison doing nearly all the talking.

On this particular morning, Allison, as guest, felt privileged to make objection.

"I don't see why you find it all so interesting," she protested. "I'm sure, if you lived in it, all the time, you would find it tame enough."

Hilda looked up from her knitting.

"If you did n't sound so spunky, I should tell you it was because I loved you enough to be interested in each little detail that concerns your life," she observed. "As it is, I'll merely say it's just because I find you wild and different. No. You need n't take that as a personal affront, Allison. It's a phrase one of your compatriots used about America, once on a time. I stored it up for later use."

"And you find it apropos?" Allison paused to thread her needle.

"No; merely rather telling. That counts for a good deal more, though. It is better to be pungent than

relevant. Some day, I'm going to use the phrase on Mr. Tremaine."

"Why Bernon in particular?"

"Because I like to see him turn himself into an oyster," Hilda answered tranquilly.

"Poor Bernon!"

"Not poor Bernon in the least. I always get the worst of it, when it happens. However, it is interesting. I never had a chance before to watch an oyster in his pearl-producing mood."

"Then you think there will be a pearl, some day?" In her sudden interest, Allison dropped her work, needle and all, on the floor.

With unabated tranquillity, Hilda stooped and picked it up.

"I'd advise a sewing-apron, Allison, one of those stout affairs with a turn-up pouch across the bottom. The pearl? Yes, of course I expect it. Else, what's the use of an oyster's getting his innate self into such a state of repressed turmoil? The worst of it is," she wagged her head at the strip of knitting which dropped from between her slim hands; "oysters never cackle, so no one can ever tell when the constructive tantrum is at an end and the pearl is ready for inspection."

And Allison gave up the metaphor at once, sure that, if she pursued it farther, it would lead around to hens and thence, by devious ways known only to Hilda Lynde, to the dubbing Tremaine an omelette. Instead, —

"What are you knitting, Hilda?" she queried.

"Neckties." Hilda stretched out the long green stripe across her knee. "Charity ones, of course," she added hastily. "I know they're entirely out of fashion; but

I like to do it, and home missionaries never are very critical of their haberdashery. I had the stuff left over from the days when Don kept me busy with the things, so I am working it off in this way. It won't hurt the missionaries, unless it inculcates a love of finery; and it makes me feel very sanctified. Do you know, Allison," there came an odd catch in her voice; "just once in a while, I feel as if I needed a little sanctity."

"You?"

"Yes, even I," Hilda made impetuous answer. "Not for my soul's salvation; I hope that was all settled, long ago. Really, it saves any amount of worry, Allison, to own a good, pudgy theory of predestination. But to steady me down. Now and then I get tired of the thistledown end of things, and have a vague hankering," she laughed at her own uncouth word; "for a bit of ballast. Not often, of course. Generally I like the thistledown. It's a relief not to have too much expected of one; but it is n't always a compliment to the possibilities of one's higher nature."

Allison reflected, passing in swift review her own responsible existence.

"No," she assented then. "Still, it must be very restful."

Hilda dropped her knitting and clasped her hands across her knee.

"Allison," she asked slowly; "has it ever occurred to you to wonder how it would feel to be nothing but an incident?"

Allison looked puzzled.

"I am a little afraid —" she was beginning.

Hilda interrupted, laughing; but the laugh failed to light her eyes.

"That you don't understand? No wonder, so you need n't apologize. I did n't expect you to understand; you can't, until you have been through it. What I mean is this: I am perfectly happy and contented. I have a glorious time with myself and everybody else. And yet, there's the inevitable fly in my pot of ointment. In the strictest sense of the word, I don't belong to anybody, and occasionally it gets to be a little — lonesome."

"Your cousin?" Allison suggested quickly, alarmed at a tremor in Hilda's face, a tremor which she took for a harbinger of tears. "I'm sure he is like a brother."

But Hilda had no idea of shedding tears; she was too well-trained for that. It would have been bad manners; besides, emotions leave unbecoming tracks behind them. She answered with absolute steadiness.

"Yes; but the very fact that one stops to point out the likeness emphasizes the fact that he is n't the real thing. Practically, Don is everything I want, everything. As a matter of pure theory, though, I would like to have a brother of my very own."

"You probably would n't care one tenth so much for him as you do for Mr. Rhodes," Allison made prompt suggestion, for a second time.

"Probably not. I could n't care more than I do for dear old Don; but, at least, he would be all mine. It does make a difference, too; we know it, after we have tried the other thing. If I could have a real, true brother of my own —"

"Well?" Allison recalled her from her unseeing study of the Levis heights.

"I would put up with anything, anything he might

do, just for the sake of feeling we belonged. I might be happier to be with Don, very likely I always should be with him; but, back of it all, there would be a point of actual relationship."

Allison's mind demanded the support of a concrete fact.

"But Don, as you call him, is your actual cousin."

"Yes, and Uncle Stuart is my actual uncle. I love him almost as much as I can imagine that other girls love their fathers. And Aunt Sallie is my actual aunt, as much as such a cool shadow of humanity as she is, can be an actual anything. If they were just my aunt and uncle and cousin, Allison, it would be all right; it's only that chance has crowded them into the nearer place where they don't belong, and has spoiled both their real relation to me and the place which they are popularly supposed to fill."

"And yet," Allison spoke thoughtfully; "you are happy with them."

"Completely happy, nine days out of ten. The tenth day is bound to come, though; and when it comes, I wonder —" Again her eyes sought the glistening heights above the ice-flecked river.

This time, Allison made no effort to recall her. Instead, she waited, her sewing fallen on her knee. When at last Hilda spoke, her voice was dreamy.

"What the real ones were like," she added, more to herself, however, than to Allison.

"You mean that you don't know?" As if in spite of itself, the question slipped over Allison's discreet lips.

Drearily Hilda shook her head. Despite her training, tears were not far off, this time, and it was a minute or two before she dared trust herself to speak.

"No," she answered then; "I never knew, never have known. When I was a little bit of a girl, Uncle Stuart took me into the library all alone with him, one day, and talked to me about it. He cried a little, too." The simplicity of her far-off childhood came back into her phrases, as she told the story. "He told me that now he was the only papa I could ever have, that he would do his best to fill my papa's place, and would I try to think of him like that, and not worry, nor ask questions about things I could never understand."

Her voice died away to a slow murmur. For the instant, it held the persuasive cadence of one arguing with a little child. Then she sat silent, her eyes once more upon the river, slowly filling with the ice broken by the rising tide. At last she raised her head a little proudly.

"And I never did," she went on. "Once telling me not to ask questions was quite enough. It could n't stop my thinking them, though. And they are n't nice questions, either. That's the reason I have always done my best not to give myself time for much thinking."

Again there came the silence. Allison scarcely knew what answer she should make to this strange confidence, so unsought, so unexpected. Fearing lest she might say the wrong thing, she held her peace and waited. After another interval, a longer one, this time, Hilda resumed her monologue.

"Just once Don and I have talked about it; since we were grown-up, that is. When we were tiny things, we used to play *relations* by the hour. Our largest dolls were always my parents; we used to go to visit them, and they used to give us frosted cakes." She laughed a little at the childish memory. "That died a natural death, though, in the course of time, wore out with our

dolls. But just once, since Don was out of college, we talked the matter over.

"Does he know?" Allison asked, for, this time, the pause was obviously for a question.

"No more than I do; and that is absolutely nothing. The only thing I learned from all our talk was that Aunt Sallie had sat on the edge of his bed, one night, and cried a good deal, and forbidden him ever to say a word of any sort as if I were n't his sister. I must say, it was nice of Aunt Sallie, too, barring the tears," Hilda added reminiscently. "Poor dear old Don had kept still about it, ever since."

This time, Allison yielded to her curiosity.

"How did he happen to speak out then?" she queried.

"We blundered on it, one night, when we were all alone. Uncle Stuart and Aunt Sallie had gone to a bail somewhere. Don had too much cold to go; and, at the last minute, I decided I would stay at home with him. We had been talking over all sorts of child things, our dolls included; and, all at once, we found we had blundered so far inside the subject that it was better to go on than to back ingloriously out."

Allison nodded.

"And?" she said interrogatively.

Hilda's answer came with a rush of feeling that surprised them both.

"And I never knew how much I loved dear old Don, till that very night, never knew how much reason I had for loving him."

She picked up her knitting once more, and fell to clicking her needles industriously. It was plain to Allison that the details of that talk were far too sacred to

Hilda Lynde for her to think of sharing them with an outsider. Accordingly, she took up her own work again, with an assumption of brisk interest; and, for a time, the silence of the room was unbroken.

"Do you know what I think about it all?" Hilda asked quietly at length.

"No. What?" And Hilda took grateful note of the absence of the *dear* which another, lesser woman would have been sure to use.

Hilda went on quite unflinchingly.

"Of course, in all these years, I have had time enough to think it all out. Of course, Allison, we both of us know that there's never any such mystery, unless there's some disgrace hidden underneath it. People don't take so much trouble to cover up their honours. Uncle Stuart told me just this: that my father was unfortunate, that my mother went away and left him all alone, went back to her own people. If she did that, she a decent woman, and left her husband and her baby daughter to get on alone —" A needle snapped in two. Hilda flushed a little; then she controlled herself and picked up her dropped stitches, before she spoke again. "Of course, *unfortunate* is a vague term; it may mean all sorts of things. But, knowing the way Uncle Stuart and his father before him have been prominent in Wall Street, it seems reasonably safe to infer that my father was in it, too. Moreover, as long as I've not a cent to my name, except as Uncle Stuart gives it to me, and as there is some mystery that has to be covered up, I've come to the conclusion that — my father — was — dishonest."

"In what way, Hilda?"

"How should I know in what way, Allison?" Hilda's

voice showed a trace of her old petulance. "I was not there; no one has told me anything about it. It is only what I have studied out for myself. He may have embezzled; he may have misappropriated funds; he may have — Oh, there are dozens of ways such men go wrong. And he did go wrong, too. I feel it in my blood, sometimes, feel that I'm not always reliable. Allison," the words came with a sort of hush; "it is a fearful thing to feel sure your family is stained like that, fearful to know that you've such blood in your veins. You fight it, and it fights you; and all the time you wonder whether you love your ancestors more, or blame them more for what they may have put inside — Yes?" Her emotion swiftly cast aside, her voice ran out clearly, in answer to the sudden knock.

Don's voice came in through the closed door.

"Hilda! I'm so hungry. Aren't you girls ever coming to have luncheon? We've had a stunning drive, and I've brought Tremaine back here with us. Come along. He is waiting in the hall at the top of the stairs, and if you don't hurry he'll be eating up the nearest beef boy."

"All right, Don." Again Allison marvelled at the swift control. "We'll be here, in just a minute. Protect the boy till we come." Then she turned to Allison. "Ready, Allison? Then we'll go. From all accounts, it's not advisable to keep those starved men waiting."

A moment later, she was greeting Tremaine and, at his side, sauntering into the dining-room, talking with a vivaciousness which seemed to have no thought beyond the choice of table and the trio of waiters making their everlasting toast above the crackling logs.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"REALLY. . . though, I find it in my heart to wish you were not," Hilda remarked pensively. Tremaine laughed.

"Athletics are socially decent, Miss Lynde."

"Of course. You don't need to preach that gospel to us Americans. I'm not worrying about your manners; I'm a good deal more concerned about your muscles."

"I am strong enough," he reassured her. "We wiry chaps can outdo the beefy ones, every time."

"How little you care! It's too bad of you to spoil my fine antithesis. . . Still, if you must have it in crude language, I'm awfully afraid you'll break your bones, or else have all your teeth knocked out. I've always said I never could bring myself to the point of sitting out a game of any sort, if I had a friend on either of the teams."

"There is one way of escape," Tremaine told her, albeit with a falling face.

"That you don't play," she assented swiftly.

"I have given my word. No; that you stop at home."

She threw him a mocking glance.

"Never! It would be too selfish. No; if anything should happen to you, I never could forgive myself. I were n't there to fall into hysterics in your behalf. Else, what's the good of friends?"

He appeared to be considering the matter quite intently.

"I had n't thought of it, that way," he said. "I had supposed it was their place to pat you on the back, when you came in ahead, and to look the other way, when you did n't. I'm not sure, though, but it would be rather comforting to have them spilling their tears over a chap's well-meaning failure. It's not the way we generally work it, though."

"I don't see how you should know," she said thoughtfully, while her eyes roved up and down over the spare, sinewy figure and the determined face waiting before her chair.

"Why not?"

"One does n't associate failure with you," she told him, with engaging frankness.

He shook his head.

"So much the better. It shows I'm not too transparent," he answered gravely. "Some things we like best to keep quite to ourselves. Our failures are among them."

"Have you any?" she questioned lazily, lightly, as she still sat leaning back in her comfortable chair, watching him with intent and friendly curiosity.

"I've failed in the main thing of all," he told her curtly, his eyes upon the strip of carpet between them.

"What then?"

"Finding a place where I belong." The next minute, he could have bitten out his tongue for having spoken this besetting truth. "Well," he went on briskly; "what about the match? Will you come?"

She roused herself into attention to the concrete fact.

"Yes, if you won't get killed. How does it happen that you are playing, though? You don't do it, as a rule?"

"No. I'm just an amateur; I only do it for the fun of the thing. I am quick, though, and strong enough to play a fair game, in spite of my lack of weight. The regular man was knocked out, last time; the substitute is ill, and they are bound to play the match, or else be ruled out of trying for the championship," he told her, with a prolix explanation designed to divert her mind from what had gone before.

In vain.

"Then, it strikes me, you've found one place where you very much belong," she answered coolly. "Space-filling may not be a particularly glorious occupation; but it's a very needed one, and a distinct art in itself. But are you honestly going to play with all sorts of sluggish professionals?"

"I am."

"And slug, too?" She shuddered. Then she laughed. "I fancy that is n't in your line, Mr. Tremaine. But, do you know, I rather hate the whole idea. Can't you get an understudy?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Cruel of you to ask the question, Miss Lynde! I am the last man in line for the position; I've not yet reached the glory of having an understudy. Still, I'll do my best not to be slaughtered."

"And to make a record," she insisted unexpectedly. "I shall be there, to serve as mascotte. I wish your colour were n't blue, though; it is hideously unbecoming. But really, apart from my anxious qualms, I know I shall enjoy myself. I have played the game

enough to know which is the puck and which the goal, and to take an intelligent interest in what is going on around me."

"You still play?"

She shook her head.

"I grew tired of spending all my time, sitting on the side lines. I was in a chronic state of being penalized for upsetting people that skated in between me and the puck. It did n't seem quite fair, either; for, just as soon as the puck was out of the way, I used to stop to pick them up and dust them off. Umpires are so illogical and tactless," she added unexpectedly.

"So I find them. Well, I'll save the seats, then, for you and Don." And, with a nod, he was gone.

Hilda sat still and gazed after him thoughtfully. What a boy he had looked, that morning, as he had come dashing in, just after breakfast, to tell her about the match, and about his playing in it, and to ask if she and Don would care to go! Allison had already said something to her of this same hockey match; she herself had been eager to see the Canadian game played on its own ice. Now, though, she drew back a little from the thought. The queen of sports for beauty, for grace and for fierce excitement, it was leader, too, for danger. So many things might happen in the mad race for victory. Overtrained nerves were by no means always the most level, tempers often gave way before the desire to win at any price. And then things happened, swiftly, almost without conscious volition. On that account, it was one thing to watch a senior hockey match played out by those impersonal pawns known as professionals; it would be quite another matter to sit and smile in polite unconcern, and

see one's friend rush headlong into the thickest of the fray. Other things being equal, Hilda preferred that no one should be slaughtered; with Bernon Tremaine substituting on the team, preference would become an agony of nervous fear. Even Gerrans she could have watched with a far greater sense of composure, sure that his sense of humour would keep him from playing too strenuous a game. Once Tremaine shut his teeth and went into it, however, she knew that he would be in the very thickest of the fray from start to finish.

Her first impulse had been to plead another engagement, and to stay at home alone. Then she had yielded to a second thought. Tremaine's eagerness had been altogether boyish; boyish, too, his disappointment at her suggested absence. Besides she might as well be there upon the spot, watching with her own eyes, as sitting at home, dreading the thing that probably would not happen. And yet, she confessed to herself that likely it would happen. Tremaine had in him all the elements that go to make up the reckless player; moreover, he was far too light of build to stand up against the impact of a burly professional, skating at full speed. She also confessed to herself a strong aversion to having Tremaine knocked out. Apart from all considerations of his own comfort, she preferred to have him hale and lusty, able to drop in on them at all hours of the day and evening. Nevertheless, she resolved to go. Tremaine obviously wished to have her there; Don would count on having her beside him. She would go, and sit it out with what smiling, stoic grace she could.

In the end, Allison and Gerrans went with them, and Fordyce and Ethel Cameron had seats adjoining. It was unconscionably late, however, when they en-

tered the rink, that night. Donald and Hilda, with Gerrans, had dined with Allison, to be ready for an early start; but, just as they were hurrying over their coffee, Tremaine had rung up on the telephone. There had been some sort of an accident to an in-coming train; it would be delayed at least an hour. The teams were already in; but the referee was on board the wreck, and the match must await his coming. No need for them to go to sit inside the clammy rink, when it was perfectly easy for him to keep them informed of the progress of events. Thanks, no. He knew the quality of the Carhart coffee, the charm of the Carhart fire; but he was up with the home team, and with the home team he must remain. He would call them up again.

He did call them up again, and many times over again, each time with a different bulletin, a later hour for the beginning of the play. The stimulus of the coffee had worn itself out a little; the talk was waxing thin and intermittent, and even Gerrans was confessing to some drowsiness when, hard on to eleven o'clock, the telephone rang sharply.

"You, Gerrans? It's I, Tremaine. The train has passed Lorette; it will be in now, in a few minutes; and they'll have the match played as soon as Russell can get up here. And listen. I'm at the rink now. At this hour of the night, it's chilly as the grave. Remember that Miss Lynde is n't used to it, and be sure she is well wrapped up. Your seats are in the new balcony, you know, front row and in the very middle."

It was cold as the grave inside the rink, cold and filled with a faint blue smoke from the cigarettes with which the most of the crowd, patiently waiting there for

four long hours, had been unlawfully seeking to warm themselves. Even Ethel Cameron's red hair drooped limply on her forehead, and Fordyce was manifestly depressed, as they arose to let the quartette pass in beyond them, a merry, warm quartette, fresh from a cosy fireside and from the strong and scalding coffee which Mrs. Carhart herself had brewed, at the coming of Tremaine's last summons.

Hilda, seating herself between Allison and Gerrans, nodding to her acquaintances here and there in the crowd around her, felt she was upon unfamiliar ground. During the past few days, she had skated often in the rink, for Tremaine had carried out his intention of adopting her as partner for the carnival, and together they had practised as often as they both could spare the time. The rink, with its galleries empty and its ice dotted with gay skaters, however, was quite a different thing from the rink as it was now, at midnight, its ice cleared for a decisive match of a hard-contested season, its galleries packed with a noisy, eager crowd, tired with the long waiting and, on that account, the more ready to break out into any demonstration, hostile or otherwise, which the whim of the moment might suggest.

Just at present, the moment's whim suggested a derisive sort of impatience; and the roof was echoing to the whistles and catcalls of the gallery gods who, descended from their usual high Olympus of the theatres, were forced to stand on the strip of floor that edged the ice. The gallery above echoed the clamour, but rather timidly, as befitted their more exalted rank, while the high aristocracy of all, in the glass-walled box, smiled out upon it with an approving condescen-

sion which shared the mood, but deplored the method of its outlet.

Then the clamour rose to a babel, as a slim, curly-headed stripling in his normal costume came skati- > nonchalantly forth across the empty ice-sheet. It was the missing referee. Only a moment later, the two teenagers, blue and red, came out of their respective dressing-rooms, edged their way through the crowd deposited from high Olympus and went gliding off across the ice, testing its texture, its resistance to their strokes.

Among the other men, professionals all and of a different human stock, Tremaine looked singularly small and slight. His pale hair and yellow eyes, the lack of ruddy colour in his cheeks added to the first impression. He seemed far too delicate a type of man to be of use in such a match as the one before him. As she looked down at him, Hilda felt a swift revulsion from her causeless fear. A player such as he looked to be, a mere sub-substitute, as he indubitably was, would never be in the slightest bit of danger, for the simple reason that he never would get into the thickest of the play. He was like a baby amongst full-grown men. Besides, after all, why had she cared so much about his safety? Now that she had dismissed her fears, she was inclined to laugh at them as quite preposterous. They had been causeless fears, in every sense. Why should she be so anxious about Tremaine, a mere acquaintance of a three-weeks standing? She answered Gerrans's comments with complete unconcern; then, turning to the ice once more, she threw a merry nod down upon Tremaine, just skating to his place directly facing her and only half the ice away.

As Tremaine nodded back at her, something in the

glint of his eyes caught her attention and set her to wondering whether, after all, he were quite the child he seemed; whether . . . and nerve and determination might not count . . . something, even against beefy brawn. Then the whistle blew, and Hilda lost all conscious wonder, as she sat huddled forward, fingers shut hard on the rail before her, eyes on the blue and maroon figures which rushed and darted and spun and glided, which opened out until the whole ice was dotted thick with them, which bunched together into a tangle of flashing skates and clashing sticks and of panting, writhing human bodies, then opened out again to go on swooping, darting as before, until the curly-headed stripling brought them to a standstill with his whistle.

Here and there a man went down, sprawling awkwardly across the ice, or falling in a thudding lump. No one heeded. Now and then there came a crash of boarding, as a man cannoned against the fence that walled the ice. No one paid the least attention. A fallen man was useless. It was for him to pick himself up and make himself of use as speedily as possible. Bumps and bruises and battered shins counted for nothing, until the match was over; the puck was the one thing that mattered, that and the adversary's goal. Back into the fight again the fallen man must go, to beat his way up to the flying, slithering puck, to wrench it from his adversary's keeping, to nurse it, coax it, dodge with it, slipping and sliding across the fast-roughening ice, to pass it to a fellow teamsman, to catch it back again and then, seizing an instant of clear ice before him, to send it hurtling up the ice, straight between the goal-keeper and his brandished, guarding stick. And then? To skate off nonchalantly across

the ice, pretending to be deaf to the cheers that cut the soggy, clammy air.

And Tremaine?

One such instant had just fallen to his lot; and Hilda, deaf to the voice of Gerrans in her ears, was uttering inarticulate little cries of fierce excitement and gesticulating with her muff in a fashion which, later, filled her soul with the intensest shame. For the moment, however, she had ceased to care for the laws of decorum. Caught in the tide of general excitement which had been mounting steadily through all the first half, and through three-quarters of the second, of a hard-fought match, filled with pride in the prowess of Tremaine whose yellow eyes, gleaming like topazes, had long since ceased to turn up to the spot where his friends were seated, the girl was far past heeding her life-long theories as to wellbred, stoical indifference. From the start, she had realized that Tremaine, slight and ineffectual as he looked, was there to play, to play at the very heart of things. Of his proficiency in skating, she had long since ceased to feel any question. Whether he raced or dodged, he was always sure to be the first man after the puck. Lithe as an eel, he wriggled his way through any tangle of flying arms and smashing sticks. He had a trick of avoiding collision at the half-past-eleventh hour, avoiding it with a swift turn, an unruffled calmness deadly to the nerve of his astonished adversary who had sought in vain to block him, then of swooping swiftly forward on a wholly new course that brought him once more master of the flying puck, nursing it, passing it, snatching it out of an opposing pass; then skating tranquilly away with it cuddled against his

stick, until the instant came for the final and decisive blow. Never once did his nerve fail him, never once his courage. He made his calculations as unerringly and with as much apparent calm as he might have given to the plotting of a roadbed. He went skating against possible collisions from which only a miracle could bring him out alive, a miracle which never failed to operate by reason of his steady, fearless reckoning-up of all the chances. He neither hesitated, nor hurried; he was merely there, and ready. That was really all.

Long since, the crowded galleries and floor had lost all recollection of their time of preliminary waiting, all consciousness of drowsiness and chill, all of the lateness of the hour. Bit by bit, the score had tied itself, had separated, one team in the lead and then the other, then had tied again, a long, long tie which Tremaine had made and which no one else had seemed able to break. Excitement mounted; but the time was ebbing fast.

Cheer after cheer broke out from the waiting, watching crowd; groans came, too, only to be swallowed quickly. In a time like this, none knew what a bit of encouragement might do to spur on the weary men. Conscientiously the watchers suppressed their groans, ignorant as they were of the fact that, for all their cheering counted, the players might have been shut in a soundless vacuum. Twice the home team had almost made a goal, twice they had missed it, so they had had the grief of watching the puck go down, down, down the ice, only to miss their goal by the merest chance of a heedless, nervous blow. Then something happened.

That something was Tremaine. From far across

the ice where he had paused to adjust his shin-pads, to assure himself that he was in perfect trim, he came swooping down the ice, rounded the barrier of the goal, cut his way straight to the heart of the scrimmage where a half-dozen burly, husky men were fighting around the puck, and cut his way out again, his speed unchecked. To all the on-lookers but one, it looked a causeless, futile manœuvre, a mere bit of senseless bravado. That one, however, seated just above the goal, felt her pulses quicken to the point of suffocation, for she had been the one of all to see, what the others all had missed, that out of the heart of the scrimmage something else had gone besides Tremaine. That something was the round black puck which now was slithering up the ice, half hidden by the propelling stick. That on-looker was Hilda Lynde.

Strange to say, she felt no wish to cheer, to cry out in exultation. Instead, she felt herself grow stiff and taut, as if her body answered to the tension of her nerves, almost, indeed, as if the play were something she herself had made. Silent, a little pale, she watched the play through to its finish. She saw the others when at last they discovered where the puck had gone, heard the plaudits of the frenzied audience, saw the hot pursuit, the blocking, saw Tremaine dodge to and fro, seeking a safe outlet for his hard-won prize, saw the swift pass, the swifter return and then, the crowning moment of the whole, saw the puck go flying straight across the goal, straight across the broken tie. And it was the second time Tremaine had made a goal, that night.

Breathless and a little bit hysterical, she leaned back in her seat for a moment, while she lent a vacantly

smiling attention to Gerrans's ecstatic babble in her ears. Then she rallied and bent forward hastily. Tremaine came skating slowly down the ice, his face glowing and his eyes raised to where she sat above him. Smiling, glowing in return, she nodded and waved her muff. He nodded back again, and lifted his stick in brief salute, so intent upon the girl above that he neither saw nor heeded the red-sweatered giant who came skating slowly backwards towards his goal.

It seemed to Hilda that the thud of the falling body racked the rafters overhead. It seemed to her many hours that Tremaine lay there, still, before he was surrounded, lifted, carried, a limply sagging body, away across the ice. All around her there was a babel of regret and consternation, for Tremaine had many friends scattered through the balcony, and even strangers had grown to care for him in watching his plucky play. Hilda alone sat silent, her straining eyes fixed on the huddled group, now pushing their way through the crowd that fringed the ice, to vanish in the dressing-room beyond. Then, when the door shut behind them, she sank back, still silent, still strangely apathetic.

Gerrans and Fordyce already had gone leaping down the stairs to fight their way across the crowd in search of news. Gerrans was back almost at once; he knew the length of minutes in a case like this.

"It's not as bad a knock-out as it looked, Allie," he said reassuringly, as he bent above them. "Of course, he can't play out the match. Still, he's won it for them, all the same. I don't imagine it will amount to much, in the long run. It took him suddenly and when he was standing still, not looking for it, so he went down like a log. It stunned him for the minute; but it's

not at all the fall it would have been, if they had been skating at top speed." As he spoke, he slid into his former seat. "Here comes the substitute," he added, as the whistle sounded.

"Where is Mr. Fordyce?" Hilda asked, only half reassured by the words of Gerrans.

"He said he'd stay down there, and look out for Tremaine a bit. It's not as if he were quite one of the team, you know; he needs a little more dainty handling than they are used to."

"And you truly think he is n't badly hurt?" she urged him.

He turned his honest, friendly eyes full on her.

"I truly do, Miss Lynde. Else, do you think I'd be sitting here with you?" And, this time, his tone carried full conviction.

Nevertheless, Hilda gained no impression from the final moments of the play, paid not the slightest heed to the outcome of the score. Instead, she was only conscious of a blind rage at the inexorable way the match went on, heedless of the fallen, a futile fury at the spectators who, oblivious of their hero of a quarter-hour before, were now shrieking just as lustily over the next man to show his mettle. It was not that she was so much alarmed about Tremaine; rather than that, she was jealous at the swift passing of his hold upon the crowd.

Afterwards, the match over, there was the short walk homeward through the otherwise deserted streets, beneath the vivid canopy of a purplish-pink aurora that arched the heavens from rim to rim, and met in a huge, puckered centrepiece just at the zenith. Late as it was, a good two hours past midnight, without

discussion they all went home with Allison to whom, it had been hastily agreed, Fordyce should bring the latest news, once Tremaine was comfortably settled.

It was a long hour before Fordyce came, an hour while the first careless chatter slowly gave way before the many anxious pauses. When he did come, his news was not too good.

"He's over the worst of things now," Fordyce made his report. "He came out of his faint and then, to everybody's surprise, he went back into it again. The doctor says that's nothing especially alarming, though, just a result of the pain. The other moose landed on top of him and twisted back his hand. It strained the cords a good deal, and cracked the wrist bone — nothing serious nor lasting, but blastedly uncomfortable while it does last. I waited till they got the ambulance and packed him off to the hospital, and then I came on here to tell you, so you could go to bed in peace."

The chorus of lamenting pity lasted long. It was interrupted at length by Gerrans.

"Poor old chap!" he said slowly. "I am sorry." And his voice bore out the statement of his words. "So he's down at the Jeffrey Hale?"

Fordyce shook his head.

"No," he answered briefly. "He insisted on being taken to the Hôtel-Dieu; the ambulance has just gone down Palace Hill."

There came a little silence. Then Gerrans whistled low.

"The deuce!" he said. "Now what do you suppose that's for?"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE next afternoon, directly after luncheon, Don and Hilda, straying aimlessly along the Ramparts, came not altogether by chance around the corner of the massive gray front of the Hôtel-Dieu.

Don started up the steps.

"Now we're here," he said; "we may as well go in and ask for Tremaine."

Hilda demurred.

"What's the use, Don? You telephoned over, just this morning."

"No matter if I did. It won't do any hurt to ask, and it does n't look quite decent to pass by on the other side. Jove!" Don whistled, as he looked up at the heavy walls above him. "I'd hate it to be shut up inside this fortress. It's any amount stronger than the Citadel."

And Don spoke truly, albeit the strength was measured by such different units.

"Well, coming?" he asked, pausing half way up the steps.

"It looks so foolish," Hilda demurred again.

"It looks a lot more foolish, though, for you to sit about outside, while I go in. Besides, I'm only going to the door," he argued.

Hilda laughed. Then she yielded to his utterly illogical argument and went up the steps behind him, a

dainty figure of modernity in her rich fur and feathers, against the grim and massy setting of the portal.

Inside the door was a tiled vestibule, furnished with a directory of doctors, a bell button, a sliding panel, and not much else. Don eyed the impressive directory askance.

"Poor old Tremaine! Do you suppose he has to be cured by all that retinue of duffers?" he queried, with a flippant sort of pity. "It's enough to make a fellow give up the ghost, just the feeling he's invalided in such competent hands. The Jeffrey Hale was bad enough; but that was casual, beside this thing. From the look of this, you'd have to be guaranteed *dangerous*, before they'd let you in here. I say, shall we ring the bell, or pound on that trap-door thing?"

"Both, one with each hand," Hilda advised him. "Do hurry up, Don. This place smells of sudden death."

Don pointed to the panel.

"They provide their way of escape, though," he assured her. "Well, here goes!" And he smote the button of the bell with all the vigour of a well-gloved thumb.

"I hate hospitals," Hilda made soliloquy; "and I think, just as a matter of principle, that I hate nuns. They give me gooseflesh in my shoulder blades. I do hope poor Mr. Tremaine won't be here long; it makes me creepy-crawly to think that any one I know is shut —"

But the panel slid aside, and a woman's face, white-capped and smiling, appeared within the opening.

"You wish?" she said interrogatively, wasting no time in preliminary French.

Don's hat came off with a sweeping flourish.

"To ask for Mr. Tremaine, madame."

Without answer, the woman stepped aside and out of view. An instant later, the main door swung open, to disclose a little nun, white-robed from head to heel, save for the long black veil covering her head and flowing softly down across her shoulders. Again Don's hat flew off, this time to stay, and his eyes and lips lighted with a sunny smile of liking.

The nun smiled back in answer. How could she help herself, indeed, with Donald Rhodes before her?

"You wish to see Monsieur Tremaine?" she asked him, in the purest French.

"Not to see him." Don felt singularly at ease before the tiny little woman, dainty as a Paris doll. "We were passing, my cousin and I, and we called to find out how he was."

"But it is the hour for visits," the nun said tentatively.

"I know, but — Really, you see, he only came in, last night; this morning, rather. He would n't be able to see us," Don assured her.

"It is possible," the nun made guarded answer, rather as if Don, and not she herself, were urgent for the interview. "I will send for Sister St. Saba. She is in charge of the case. Please come this way." And, before Don could stop her, she was trotting down the shining, spotless corridor, leaving them to sit side by side upon the slippery haircloth sofa of the general waiting-room, while she departed to send a messenger in search of Tremaine's attendant nun.

The messenger found the attendant nun busy with Tremaine's wrist. In fact, it was strange how much

of the time Sister St. Saba had thought it necessary to devote to the injured wrist, since she had been awakened from sound sleep, the night before, and put in charge of the case. It would not be a long case, the doctor told her in the hall outside; but, while it lasted, it would need the most faithful, skilful care, else there might be consequences later on. The doctor knew Tremaine slightly; like everybody else, though, who had lived long in the city, he knew him well by reputation, and he liked all that he knew. For that reason, he had made an especial point of having Sister St. Saba on the case, knowing full well the quality of the care that she would give him.

Sister St. Saba had listened, her arms crossed inside her wide white sleeves and her veiled head nodding gravely to the points of his instruction. Her eyes glittered a little feverishly, it seemed to him; but that was only to be expected in a woman, just dragged out of heavy sleep and told to dress and go on duty as soon as possible. Else, she was quite unruffled, quite undisturbed in spirit by the breaking of her rest. Her vows had settled that, long years before. Nervousness was not for her, nor petulance, nor yet plea of fatigue. Her place was not in bed and resting; it was beside the sick, to give them what care she could. And it was wonderful care that she did give. Tremaine's own mother could not have touched the injured wrist with gentler, more pitiful fingers; his own mother could not have settled him down for the scanty remainder of the night with a more friendly, careful unconcern which, taking thought at every point for his comfort, yet at no point collided with his masculine hatred of seeming to like the being coddled. Strong and steady as a man,

gentle as a woman, sexless, yet curiously personal in all her interest in what concerned his comfort and his accident. Sister St. Saba's care seemed filling all the room, as imperceptible as the oxygen about them, but as vigorously strengthening.

Next morning, over breakfast, she lingered to talk a little.

"It was a bad fall you had, Bernon; but a good escape," she told him. "A little more, and your hockey would have been ended for all time."

"Really? But it was n't so bad as that," he objected. "The other chap just sat down on top of me; that was all there was about it."

"Except his size and yours, and the angle of his fall," Sister St. Saba corrected, with a smile. "Bernon, why will you play the ugly game?"

His mind went swiftly backward over the details of the previous night; the packed and shrieking galleries, the glistening sheet of ice, the flying puck, the straining, struggling players, and finally Hilda's face, flushed with excitement and suffused with happy pride. Then he glanced down at his bandaged wrist. It ached, ached with a vehemence which no amount of mentality could ignore or down. And yet, it had been well worth the while.

"It's not the game," he defended it promptly. "The same thing might have happened on any street corner in town."

The nun smiled quietly. She saw no need to strengthen her argument by telling him of his many, many predecessors who had been brought inside this building. Instead, —

"You find your breakfast right?" she asked, the

while she bent forward and, with a motherly, comfortable sort of touch, pushed the tray a bit nearer to his hand.

He smiled back at her boyishly.

"Have n't you always told me that, if the time should ever come, you would take care of me?" he reminded her. "You're having your innings now, and you appear to be making the most of them. It's the merest chance that I am here, though. They nearly had me lugged off to the Jeffrey Hale, before I came to my senses enough to stop them."

"And what then?" There was a little catch in Sister St. Saba's breath.

Tremaine eyed her jocosely from above his half-empty cup of coffee.

"Merely that I did come to my senses, and that I did stop them," he told her coolly. "It was an old, old promise, you know. I made it too long ago to break it now. Moreover," he paused, until the cup was quite empty; "I suspect that I should have broken out of bed down there, and walked away over here, with all the staff rushing after me; that is, if I had n't come to my senses in time to keep them from packing me off down there. No; not any more, thank you. It's very good, though." He settled back against his pillows, looking up at her with eyes that, although merry, were yet a little thoughtful. "Do you suppose," he asked abruptly then; "that, after all this time, I'd have let anybody else fuss over me but you?"

Under the nun's skin, delicately white between the white linen bands that framed it round, the blood rose, warm and pink.

"Thank you, Bernon," she said very gently. "You

are loyal to me; you always have been." Then she rose, bustling a little, to dismiss the slight hush that lay around them. "Now the tray? You have finished? Very well. And now the aching wrist. Let me see what I can do."

Later, the doctor came. Later, there was the room to set in order from his visit. Later still, there was the helping Tremaine to get himself inside his proper raiment without damage to the invalided wrist. It was nearly noon, before Sister St. Saba could sit down beside him and have another bit of chat.

"Tell me," she said then, as she took a chair, and then clasped her small, capable hands beneath her sleeves; "is it a happy winter you are having, Ber-non?"

"Very." The fervour of his accent surprised them both.

"Even with this?" She pointed to the wrist.

Again his mind went rushing backward, to rest upon the picture of a flushed and eager face, with lambent, pale brown eyes and smiling lips, a face which seemed gleaming down upon him from beneath its frame of soft, dark feathers. Then he smiled.

"Even with this," he told her.

As sometimes happens, her next words touched, albeit indirectly, upon the focus of his thoughts.

"Tell me," she asked again, smiling apologetically at her own discursiveness; "have you ever heard again from the young American, your last-fall friend?"

"Surely, yes." Tremaine's nod gave accent to his words. "He is here now; he has been, for the last three weeks."

The nun's full sleeves shook a little. Then, freeing

one hand, she brushed away a possible bit of dust. That done, she clasped her hands once more.

"Here in Quebec again? What is he doing here again so soon?" she queried carelessly.

Tremaine laughed.

"Enjoying himself immensely, Sister St. Saba. This time, he has his cousin with him."

But, with all a nun's equivalent for haste, Sister St. Saba had started to her feet.

"What will you think of me as nurse!" she said hurriedly. "It is past the time for me to do your wrist."

Tremaine balked a little.

"Sit still and amuse me," he objected. "It feels better now, better than it has done at all, and the doctor said that once in two hours now would be enough."

"After this noon." The correction came from Sister St. Saba's lips with a slow inflection which allowed no argument. "It is not yet noon." And, drawing up her chair, she fell to work upon the bandaged wrist, while Tremaine gritted his teeth and bore the resultant misery with what pluck he was able. "There," she said at length, as, with fingers which never once had faltered, she laid back the injured wrist upon its cushion; "I think that will be better still. And now we may resume our talk a little, unless it tires you. No? You feel no need to rest before your dinner? You young men are strange, strange patients. You need a great amount of killing, before you will admit that you are feeling ill." It seemed to Tremaine that her laugh was a little tremulous.

He sought to reassure her.

"I'm hard as nails, Sister St. Saba, strong as an ox.

A man can't be very ill, just from a little strain to his wrist."

"Little! We nurses know what is the pain of injuries, and where."

Tremaine laughed outright. His masculine mirth sounded strangely out of keeping with his whole environment; above all, with the religious garb and bearing of his nurse.

"I rather thought I was the one to know that, Sister St. Saba. At least, it does n't leave me much room for doubt. But, I say," he added, as a new thought struck him: "have n't you some other patients to look after? Really, there is no especial sense in my monopolizing you like this."

She flushed a little.

"No one needs me just at present. Later, it may be." Then she returned to the subject of their interrupted talk. "And your friend, Mr. Rhodes: do you see him often?" she inquired.

"Every day or so."

"And — and his cousin, too?"

Tremaine nodded.

"They are in things a good deal, up here," he added in explanation of his nod.

"And you like her; like her, that is, as well as you do him?" she queried carelessly, while once more she buried her hands from sight within her sleeves.

Then she unclasped them hastily, jaded from her outward calm by her astonishment at the new, eager light which had flashed into Tremaine's rather inexpressive face.

"Like her! Yes!" he said, with an abandonment of enthusiasm which came more than a little out of his

reaction from the nerve strain of the night before.
"One does n't see so many girls like her."

The nun's eyes flickered. Tremaine, watching, wondered if she too shared in the potential jealousies said to be the unfailing heritage of the eternal woman. Then he dismissed the idea as absurd.

"Is she so pretty?" Sister St. Saba was asking him.

"After a fashion, yes." Tremaine showed his possession of the unfailing heritage of the eternal man by the way he was obviously floundering about in his own mind, seeking terms in which to describe the object of his admiration. Prudently he abandoned the attempt. "You see, she's so all-round jolly," he concluded lamely. Then he added, by way of postscript to his lame conclusion, "At least, she is n't always jolly, you know. In fact, it's when she stops and turns serious that you like her best of all."

Sister St. Saba rose. During her years of nursing, she had had enough experience of mankind to feel assured that nothing more definite was to be expected from Bernon Tremaine upon the subject of their discussion. Accordingly, she explained to Tremaine that her other duties called her. She went away to perform those duties; but she was back again at dinner time, bringing his tray.

She lingered beside him while he ate and drank, lingered to talk a little afterwards; this time, not about the visiting Americans, but about the match, the night before, about his fall. Then, going yet farther back, she asked about his work in the town office and, earlier, in the field. That she had been a woman of education and of knowledge of the world, before she took her vows of cloisterhood, was shown by every accent, every

direct, poignant question. And Tremaine answered her quite as directly, forgetting his aching wrist in the man's delight at talking shop, at lingering on the congenial details of a well-loved profession.

At last, however, Sister St. Saba rose to remove the tray, glanced at her watch and then once more seated herself beside the invalid and fell to work upon the cracked bone and the strained ligaments. Just as the new bandage was in place, a knock sounded on the open door.

"Sister St. Saba?" said a gentle voice.

Sister St. Saba went outside the doorway. There was a half-whispered colloquy; then she came back and stood upon the threshold.

"There are some friends of yours in the waiting-room," she said. "They called to ask for you. The porter thought you might perhaps care to see them."

"Did they send their names?" he queried.

"No names at all. They appeared not to expect to see you." The accent was still tentative.

"Men, of course; or were they —" His rather shamefaced laugh completed his unspoken phrase.

"One of each," the nun answered composedly.

He cast a hasty glance around the spotless room, cast another glance down across his person.

"Am I fit for visitors?" he queried. "All right, then, send them up, please. It's probably Gerrans and Allison Carhart," he added, more to himself than to the retreating petticoats of Sister St. Saba.

Sister St. Saba heard, however. All through her long acquaintance with Bernon Tremaine, she had heard his talk dotted thickly with these two familiar names; and

now, chiefly for that reason, she went herself to summon them. On the threshold of the waiting-room, she paused an instant to look at the bearers of the names, curious, as one always is curious, to compare one's mental picture with the vital fact. So soft had been the padding of her felt shoes on the floor that neither Hilda nor Don had heard her coming; and she could stand there at her leisure and watch them, unawares.

No Canadians these, she told herself, even at her first glance. These were Americans, unmistakably Americans. She knew it, although as yet she could see only their backs, as they stood side by side before the window, talking quietly together, while they looked down into the snowy street below. She recognized their nationality by instinct, the same instinct which, only a moment later, brought to her mind the realization that she was in the room with Donald Rhodes and his cousin Hilda Lynde, the two friends of whom Tremaine had been speaking, only an hour or so ago. So this girl who stood before her, a fluffy silhouette against the vivid light outside, so this was the girl who —

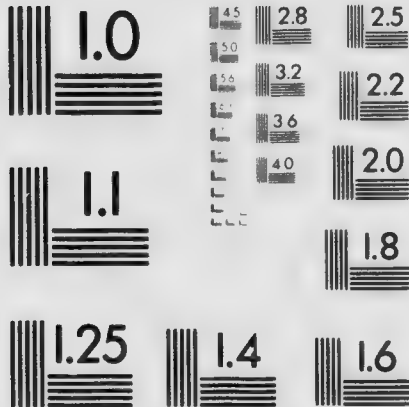
Sister St. Saba shut her lips together hard and tight, while she lifted one hand, to rest it heavily against the casing of the door. For a moment, she stood there, silent, passive, her eyes upon the ground, her other hand shut upon the silver cross which always hung about her neck from the same black cord of ribbon. Then, breathing a little heavily, as if from her recent haste to meet them, she dropped her hands and stepped across the threshold.

"You wished to see Mr. Tremaine?" she asked quietly.



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At the sound of the low contralto voice, Hilda turned about abruptly, and, for a moment, they stood there in silent contemplation, each of the other. Women both, they were; otherwise, the contrast was too great for words. The one was young, ardent, dressed in the richest fabrics made in the latest fashion, her soft hair framing her laughing face, her clothing rustling softly as she moved, exhaling that mysterious flavour which is far too faint and evanescent to be called perfume. The other was older, more quiet by reason of her years and by reason of her sacred vows, her face unlined and peaceful, save for the unwonted fluctuating colour in the cheeks, the hair concealed beneath the coif and veil, and the figure covered with the soft, full white folds, unchanging and unchanged for hard upon three centuries. Face to face they halted, each gazing into the other's pale brown eyes, contrasted, almost as if in opposition, the one the embodiment of turbulent young question, the other of the peaceful answer, halted and gazed at each other for the space of an instant, imperceptible to Don, seemingly endless to each other. Then their eyes dropped apart again. Their wordless message had been given, and received.

Hilda drew a short, quick breath. She felt as if she had been face to face with an experience whose meaning she had failed totally to grasp. Then she set the feeling down to nerves, in part relic of the night before, in part result of the unfamiliar contact with womanhood within a holy garb. Smiling, she stepped forward with a blithe little nod of her head which set the full black plumes to dancing softly.

"You are the nurse?" she asked. "We stopped just to ask for Mr. Tremaine, my cousin and I; that was

all." Under the steady scrutiny of those pale brown eyes before her, the girl was fast losing her wonted ease. Instead, she grew incoherent, apologetic. "Truly, we had n't any idea of asking to see him. We would not have thought of intruding. How is he, to-day?"

"Much better. He sent me down to say he would like to see you."

"And we'll not tire him? Is he really able, do you think?" In her eagerness, Hilda forgot the nun, and once more spoke naturally. "What do you think, Don? Would we better go?"

Sister St. Saba smiled. The smile softened the curious intentness of her gaze.

"Not when he expects you?" she questioned. "It would be better to spend a few moments with him. In fact, he needs some help to pass the time."

Hilda fell into step beside the nun, leaving Don to follow as he would. Curiously enough, her long-held notion of her inherent antipathy to nuns had vanished utterly. How could one feel antipathy, in fact, to anything so sweet and womanly as was this charming bundle of white serge, with the winning smile and the pure contralto voice? As they rounded the angle of the corridor, Hilda pressed a trifle closer to the white serge folds. This woman might be celibate, might have passed all her life within the cloister; but woman she was, and mother, to the very core of her being. Hilda longed to touch her, to caress her, not with a kiss of righteousness and peace, but with an honest, human hug. She curbed the longing sharply. Nuns were not in the world to be treated so summarily as that.

"How long will Mr. Tremaine be laid up?" she asked as casually as she was able.

Again the nun's smile lighted both their faces, her own with kindness, Hilda's with reflected pleasure.

"Only for a few days, a week at most. He will need to be careful though, for a long, long time. A crack like that is worse than many breaks. Here is his room." And, with a little gesture of dismissal, Sister St. Saba stood aside and allowed them to pass in before her.

Out in the corridor, she lingered for a moment, lingered just long enough to hear Tremaine's voice ring out in enthusiastic greeting. Then, her fingers once more shut upon the cross, she turned away and went softly down the empty corridor, turned again and came into the dim, incense-laden choir.

There she knelt long before the great high altar, her pale brown eyes fixed unseeingly upon the sculptured figure of the Man of Sorrows.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

HOWEVER, notwithstanding Sister St. Saba's dictum, Tremaine absolutely refused to be careful for a long, long time.

"What's the use?" he objected to one of Hilda's strictures on the subject.

"Prudence. In other words, selfishness."

His eyes showed his amusement.

"Sister St. Saba would say I was more selfish to ignore consequences for the sake of the present good times."

Hilda shrugged her shoulders.

"No; she would n't. That's only what she has done, herself; and the consequences in her case are much more selfish ones. A stiff wrist would be your own concern; the ties that she snapped, when she went inside that prison — Remember, I think she is charming; I only repine that all that charm should be wasted — all those ties probably left ends trailing out over all sorts of other people. She is the living embodiment of peace; but what about the others?"

"Likely they are, too," Tremaine assured her, with crisp brevity.

"Not likely in the least," she contradicted him. "The balance always swings on a middle point of average. When one end is down at rest, the other kicks up in the

air. Don't laugh. I love my metaphor. Besides, it's based on fact. Your Sister St. Saba — "

"She's not mine, Miss Lynde," he interrupted.

"Yours by right of discovery; at least, so far as I am concerned," she insisted. "As I was about to say, your Sister St. Saba is one of the most winning, most humanly sympathetic women I have ever seen. I had always hated the idea of nuns; I saw her for about ten minutes, and I became her abject slave. I'd like to be ill, almost, for the sake of having her to cuddle me. She would do it, too. But, just because she is a woman of that very sort, she must have left behind her all the greater gap in her family. The question is, had she a right to do it?"

"Perhaps she had n't any family." Tremaine's eyes were fixed upon his wrist where an edge of bandage still showed beneath his cuff.

"Most people do," Hilda argued flippantly.

Then the yellow eyes, lifted slowly from the wrist to rest upon her face, brought home to the girl the untruth of her own words.

"Except myself," she corrected herself in haste.

"And myself, even more so," he added gravely.

"You?" Her voice showed her surprise.

"Did n't you know it?"

"How should I?"

"I thought some one would have told you; Miss Carhart, or — "

Her chin rose a little proudly.

"Mr. Tremaine, it's not my habit to listen to gossip about my friends."

"I beg your pardon." He spoke rather curtly. Then he fell silent, his eyes upon the carpet.

At first, Hilda decided to allow him to keep up his silence as long as ever he chose. There was no especial sense in his sudden lapses into taciturnity. If this one were intended to rebuke her for her answer, she would show him that rebukes fell flat on undeserving innocence. She maintained the silence for a full five minutes, maintained it while a group of midwinter tourists made deliberate appraisal of the furnishings of the room, feeling the palms to see if they were cellulose or calico, kneeling up on the chairs to peer at the pictures that hung above, playing a few bars of *The Holy City* upon the grand piano and bestowing, the while, frequent and furtive glances at the man and maid, sitting together in the great curved window seat. Then, when the five minutes were at an end and the tourists had vanished in the distance, Hilda yielded to her curiosity, cloaking it, though, beneath a veil of gentle consideration for her comrade.

"I sometimes gossip with my friends, though," she assured him quietly.

His face did not light. Rather, it grew more grave.

"I ought not to have spoken, Miss Lynde," he said slowly. "I am afraid I must confess that I have been gossiping with Miss Carhart. She told me something about your own history. Really, though," he looked up gravely into her smiling eyes; "it was not just out of careless gossip that she told me. It was because, after a fashion, your story is so much like mine."

"Yours? Truly, I did n't know. Tell me; that is, if you're willing," she bade him instantly.

He started to speak. Then impatiently he rose and stood looking down at her.

"Do you mind coming for a walk outside?" he asked abruptly. "This place always smothers me a little, when I get in earnest about things. It's only fit for evening clothes and after-dinner nonsense, not for honest talk. Do you mind a little walk? The afternoon is perfect and — and I can tell you better, once I'm on my feet and moving."

She hesitated only for an instant. Then, as she saw the look in his eyes, intent and somewhat appealing, she excused herself and went to get her hat and coat. On the way to her room, she swiftly put together the main items of the message she would telephone to Don and Ethel Cameron, the other messages she would send to Fordyce and to Gervase Gerrans.

Once out in Louis Street, however, and in the throng of pleasure-seekers bound, like themselves, to make the most of the crispy afternoon, the talk was necessarily scrappy and of minor interests: of the present state of Tremaine's wrist, of the way he was spending his time, now that his five-day imprisonment was at an end, of official draughtsmanship and correspondence as far as possible, of the approaching skating carnival in winter. He still insisted upon taking part, with Hilda as his partner.

"You promised, you know," he had reminded her, that first day in the hospital. "You say you always keep your promises."

"Not when they involve the ruin of my friends," she had protested.

"No ruin about it. I don't skate with my wrists, Miss Lynde. I generally prefer to use my ankles," he assured her.

"But if you should fall again —"

"I am sorry you have so bad an opinion of my skating," he interrupted her.

"You might, though; and, if you did, no one knows what would happen. Do be a sensible man, and give up the crazy idea," she besought him.

"I am sensible," he corrected. "That's why I cling to the idea, Miss Lynde: to the idea of your skating with me, that is. They want me to lead some of the figures. I promised I would. There's no real reason against it, and it is too late for anybody else to learn the order of the thing. I am going to skate, anyway; it will do no harm, unless I have some crazy-headed girl as partner who forgets to look out a little for my damaged wrist."

"But —"

With quiet masterfulness, he had prevented her uttering the objection.

"And you are sure to remember it, Miss Lynde," he had added. Then he had turned back to Don.

To-day, the argument had renewed itself, for the carnival was only three days off, and Tremaine insisted that it was time for them to take to the ice once more, to give their agility and their memories a final polishing, in preparation for the intricate figures which they were to lead. Hilda objected, objected all the way out Louis Street. Then she yielded, not so much to Tremaine's insistence as to the breathless perils of their slippery tramp down the long hills that lead into Saint Roch's.

"Oh, anything you say, anything," she consented; "only do be careful not to sprain your wrist on this awful sidewalk. Do please be a little careful, and not tear along in this insane fashion."

Instantly he shortened step.

"I beg your pardon," he apologized. "Then we'll consider it as settled, once for all."

"Yes, if you insist on doing it, yourself. I suppose I shall be as careful as anybody, not to cling to your hand at critical moments. I don't approve, though; not in the least. Still, —" She paused to straighten up her toque, dislodged a little by the speed of their descent, and Tremaine noted, with a man's belated attention to detail, that it was the same red toque she had been wearing, that far-off day upon the ice. How remote it seemed to him now, as remote in mood as in mere passing time: "Still," Hilda was saying in his ears; "I am not so sure the rink is any more deadly than those last steps. It passes my comprehension how you natives can go scudding down them at full speed, with your whole attention fixed on the surrounding landscape."

He laughed; but he made no answer, while he turned eastward, turned again and led the way out Rue du Pont. They were on the long, open stretch of bridge, before he spoke again. When he did speak, however, from his words it was quite evident that Hilda's phrase was still ringing in his ears.

"I'm not a native, Miss Lynde," he told her then.

"But I thought —"

Again he interrupted, while he shook his head.

"No. But that is part of the story, the main part of it."

"Not all, though." Hilda spoke slowly, a little at a loss as to the answer she best would make.

He threw back his shoulders and took a deep, full breath. Then he turned to her a bit more directly.

"No. I wish it were. The rest is n't so simple. I don't mean to be egotistic, Miss Lynde; but I can't quite see how you've kept from hearing it before. I may be just a little morbid; but it seems to me that every stranger I meet here has been told about it, just as he's been told about the Battle of the Plains. However, as you really don't appear to know, and as you say you are interested —" And he plunged into his story.

He told it simply and in the barest outlines, told it in an impersonally level voice, and with a total elision of dramatic details. As he gave it to her, it was a most meagre record of an orphan baby boy, ignored by his unknown people, abandoned by his nurse, left to grow up as chance and his foster family might dictate. Then, in the same impersonally level voice, he went on to tell her of the growing-up, of school and university, and of his early work in his profession. He spoke at length of the kindness he had met on every hand; of the training and care his foster family had given him; of his life-long intimacy with Gervase Gerrans and Allison Carhart. Of the other side of it all: of the loneliness, the mortification of feeling himself cut off and ignored as unworthy, of the agonies of complete spiritual isolation he spoke no word. As far as Hilda's understanding was concerned, however, there was no need for words. It stood out in all the pauses, all the reservations; it spoke in all the things he did not say; most of all, it came out in the face of the man beside her, the stiffening lines about the lips and chin, the intent and clouded eyes, dropped for the most part to the road before them, the occasional quick, furtive glances at her face, to see if he could make out there

any hint of the compassion for which he would not deign to ask.

And Hilda heard him out in silence, her teeth shut, her hands clasped hard together within the shelter of her muff. Early in his story, she had found out she could not trust her voice to speak. Later on, she dared not meet his eyes, for fear he might discover the wet glitter of her own. Instead, she held herself still, silent, seemingly unconscious of the real tragedy to which she listened. Some subtle sense had warned the girl that Tremaine spoke out like this but rarely; that, although he was finding relief in his bald, hard-spoken story, he would have shrunk back within himself at any sign of her emotion, would have dodged away into hiding, man-fashion, at the least approach to any spoken sentiment, however full of honest sympathy.

The fact of his telling her the story she accepted as the greatest compliment she ever had received. That she might take it worthily was her one thought, her one unuttered prayer. It was no small thing to have a man such as she had found out Bernon Tremaine to be, to have a man like that, at her coming, break down the barriers of the years-long silence. It was no small thing to feel that she was the one chosen to share the confidence of such a man as that. For she was quite aware that Tremaine realized that his greater confidences were made by his long, wordless pauses, not by his spoken phrase. And Tremaine was a man, she told herself a bit reluctantly, the while she listened, a man not only to be admired and liked, but to be held in all honour and, perhaps, some day — She checked her thoughts abruptly, and, blushing scarlet, fixed them

again upon the slow words falling on her ear. Because Bernon Tremaine happened to be in a mood for turning his *Ego* inside out before her eyes, there was no especial reason she should become hysterical at the sight. Other men had done it before now. Moreover, he was not turning it inside out at all. Rather, he was cautiously loosening the drawing strings and inviting her to peep within, while he kept fast hold of the interesting corners. Anyway, sense or no sense, she would hold herself steady, politely interested, but not too sympathetic.

She did hold herself steady, too; though, as the dreary little tale ran on, it took all of her courage not to break in with some ill-judged word of maudlin sympathy. Much of the story she could understand out of her own experience. Most of the rest of it she could imagine, even though the comradeship of Don, the careful oversight of her uncle, Stuart Rhodes, had robbed her own life of like horrors. Understanding some, imagining the rest she felt it all keenly, keenly: this utter, absolute isolation of a human soul, for ever longing for the contacts denied to it by Fate. She heard him to the end, without making interruption; and then the end came at last, and still it found her silent.

After a moment, though, the reward of her hard-won silence followed. Tremaine spoke once more.

"Thank you for letting me tell it all out, and for not trying to say things back again, Miss Lynde," he said. "Do you know, this is the first time I ever have trusted myself to put the story into words?"

She nodded silently. Then she cleared her throat a little.

"No. I mean that I did n't know. But then, I did n't

even know there was a story. Still, I think I can understand your not — not caring to talk about it."

His eyes met her eyes directly. Meeting them, he was surprised to see the hanging tears.

"I hope it has n't been too bad for you," he said, in hasty contrition. "I suppose I was a selfish beast to put you through it; but I had an idea you'd understand about it all, and —"

"And not so very many people do," she interrupted. "No; they don't. I'm well aware of that."

"We both are. That was the reason, I suppose, I told you. Of course, I had no notion that you could know anything about it all, anything personal, that is, until Allison told me about your talk, that day," he said thoughtfully. "That is Allison all over, Miss Lynde. Never once in all the time I've known her have we either of us said a word to the other, directly bearing on this thing. And yet, in the nicest way you can imagine, she told me all about your talk together. Then she changed the subject and went off on something else. She woul' have died a dozen deaths, rather than point out to me that I might gain consolation from finding my friends sailing along in the same boat; but she meant it, all the same. And I do gain it, too," he added a bit inconsequently.

However, Hilda understood him, despite his ellipsis.

"I am glad of so much," she said a little wistfully. "It's the first time I've felt that the bad side of things could be of any use." Suddenly, and heedless of a passing sleigh, she turned to face him. "I wonder," she said impulsively; "if this can be the reason, ever since that first day on the ice-road, I have felt as if I need n't annotate all my remarks to you. You've

seemed to have a trick of comprehending even the things I did n't say."

Tremaine looked at her quickly, then with increasing intentness. He started to speak, but checked himself. He could not check, however, the sudden fire that smouldered in his eyes.

"I wonder," he assented simply, after a little pause. "Perhaps it may be. Anyway —?" And he held out to her a hand which was not entirely steady.

Three nights later, society betook itself to the skating rink. This was less out of regard for the skating club itself, than for the pet charity of the passing hour. Skating carnivals were no new thing in the winter-loving little city. Even this one, the most select as well as the most elaborate one to be given in years, would have commanded the slightest possible attention, judged by itself alone. None the less, society was there, and in its best array. Just as upon that other night, not quite two weeks before, the gallery was full, full the new balcony; but the stripe of floor that edged the ice was now given over, not to the gods deposed from high Olympus, but to knots of gayly-clothed men and women who sauntered to and fro, or stopped to talk with others of their kind, waiting, the while, until the skaters took the ice.

They came at last, a scant two score of them in all, each one in vivid, dainty, or fantastic costume. Like a bevy of gay butterflies, they came swarming out across the ice, gliding aimlessly to and fro for a restless, careless moment. Then, at the clashing of the band hidden in a corner of the gallery above, they fell into line and moved slowly onward: princes and courtiers and ladies-in-waiting, harlequins and mortar-

boarded students, Chinese and Scots, bats and fluffy owls and flower girls, all in an evenly-spaced, slow-moving line of brilliant colours. At the head of the slow line, marked off from all the others by their extreme simplicity, skated two figures dressed in crisp and spotless white, Hilda Lynde and Bernon Tremaine.

Their costumes, pure white and glistening, would have been enough to mark them out in any throng of masqueraders; but their perfect skating, their rhythmic accord, each with the other's stroke, added tenfold to the impression. The rest of the line might have come together by chance and for the passing hour. These two seemed partners foreordained from the beginning and a slight murmur of applause followed them, while they circled slowly round and round the rink, their hands clasped, their eyes meeting, their bodies swaying to the long, strong stroke, swaying to the languorous lilt of the unseen band in the gallery above. At the head of the ice, they paused, bowed, and then parted, to go their separate ways, each followed by his destined line of skaters. They met, and passed, and met again, their pulses throbbing with excitement, while their eyes flashed greeting, as they met and passed. They met again, and parted, to go weaving in and out through all the complex figures of the march, until at last their fingers once more came together and rested, clasped, for yet another circuit of the ice. And, by now, the lights, and the lazy lilt of the unseen band, and the long, rhythmic stroke had increased the thrill which told itself through meeting eyes and clasping fingertips, until their very pulses seemed to mingle in one strong current of excitement, until each in the other's eyes had power to blot out all the rest of the pretty scene

around them. And, meanwhile, those of the on-lookers who knew Bernon Tremaine the best, were filled with wonder at the fire that had leaped up into his yellow eyes, at the grave happiness written on his face.

The final waltz before the intermission came to its tardy end at last, and the tide set strongly towards the tearoom. Hilda hung back a little, though, away from the moving throng.

"Not for a minute, please!" she begged. "I want time to come down to earth again. It all has been so pretty, with the costumes and the lights and the dear *Oh, Canada!* that I can't bear to descend to tea and sugary cakes just yet. Do you mind?"

The question was needless. Tremaine's face alone might have assured her that he was in a mood not to mind anything she was likely to suggest. His answer, though, came promptly.

"Tea would be entirely out of harmony with things, Miss Lynde. Let's skate about the ice a bit, before we go up-stairs."

Laughing, she held out her hand to his.

"Come, then. Unless," her sudden flush betrayed contrition at her selfish lack of thought for his comfort; "unless your wrist needs rest. I quite forgot that you were still a semi-invalid."

But, fired by the rhythmic, swaying dances, fired by the tingling pulses of their meeting, clasping fingers, heedless of his injured wrist, heedless, too, of his lifelong rule of strict repression, he seized her hand in his, seized it masterfully, even a little roughly. His face had paled, and his breath came short, as if he had been running, while he made curt answer, —

"Tired! Not of this, Miss Lynde. I'd be content with Fate, if only it would keep it up for ever."

And Hilda, skating beside him, felt his hand grow icelike in the clasp of her own strong, warm fingers. Strange to say, however, she was conscious of no especial wonder at the sudden change.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"I LIKE to eat," Hilda said sententiously; "not be fed with a spoon and a poky forefinger. In other words — Yes, Don; thank you very much — in plain Saxon, then, I like to talk with interesting people, not sit in a row and be talked at."

"In plain Saxon, then, you're not going to the lecture, to-night?" Don interpreted her words.

Hilda shook her head.

"Not unless I am afflicted with a sudden wave of insomnia," she said perversely.

Fordyce clasped his hands upon the fur rug that covered their knees, and scowled malignly at his unoffending thumbs.

"I think I rather agree with Miss Lynde," he said.

"You usually do," Allison reminded him unkindly. "That is, when I want your backing in an argument."

But Fordyce pursued his own line of thought, heedless of interruptions.

"Lectures are the ultimate resource of the poverty-stricken in mind," he remarked, with professional relish of his own high-sounding phrase.

Don applauded.

"Beautiful! I could n't have said it better, Fordyce. The only trouble is that you have left it a bit vague. Which of the contracting parties is the one you mean?"

"Both," Fordyce made unexpected answer. "The lecturer generally is the chap whose seething brain can get no other outlet. The audience is made up of the chaps who can't take in any but predigested foods."

"As I was saying," Hilda went on, as soon as there was pause; "I'm much obliged for your invitation, Allison; but no power on earth would reduce me to the ignominy of accepting it. If you want to ask your history man to dinner, and put me next to him, that's quite another matter. Otherwise, I absolutely refuse to listen to him."

"The question is," Fordyce interpolated; "is Miss Carhart going to listen to him, either?"

Allison defended herself.

"I thought, in case Miss Lynde cared to go —" she was beginning.

"Going and listening are by no means synonymous terms," Fordyce reminded her.

But Hilda interrupted.

"I don't," she said flatly. "I decline to be improved. At least, I'm past improvement, and it would be too bad for you to waste your efforts. Take Don."

"Delighted!" Don made quick assent. "Only, you know, I'm quite beyond the need of being improved. I learned all about the Battle of the Plains, when I was still in knickerbockers. 'Sissy pants,' we used to call them, I remember," he added reminiscently. "They were wide in the knees, in those days. Besides, you Canadians do harp — What's the row, Fordyce?"

"Merely that you Americans are all so beastly bookish," the little lawyer told him candidly.

But Don made quick correction.

"No," he said; "as a matter of fact we are n't. We only like to have people think we are."

Fordyce once more addressed his thumb.

"I get a great deal of interest, watching you," he offered observation.

It was not entirely plain to whom his remark was addressed. Don accordingly received it in silence. Fordyce raised his spectacled eyes, and drove the matter home.

"You, I mean, Rhodes," he said.

"Do you?" Don queried calmly. "Re, pardon, then. I thought you were expounding at your major digit."

For an instant, Fordyce looked puzzled. Then he laughed out jovially.

"Do you know, come to think of it, I don't know but I do have a habit of talking at my thumb," he meditated. "It comes in handy in my legal work; I can rehearse all my best things to it, and make sure of its wincing guiltily at all the proper places. That's more than you can do in the courts, too."

"Do you mean," Allison asked him, with all the privileged freedom of an old acquaintance; "that you never knew you did it, until now?"

"Never had an idea of it, till Rhodes just pointed out the fact. That's the way it is with all of our best traits; we develop them quite subconsciously." Then Fordyce harked back to his former theme. "I wonder if that's the way you Americans do, in getting up your racial habits."

"Certainly," Hilda assured him promptly. "Our traits are all best ones. But which of them is worrying your British brain, to-day?"

"Most of them," Fordyce retorted. "That is, they interest me, not worry. It's only that, when you do come a national cropper, I want to be on the spot, to watch the direction of the fall."

"But just suppose we don't?" Don asked him.

"You will. You're sure to. No nation can prance along for ever, without stubbing its toe. Every political bog has its half-buried stumps," he argued.

Hilda leaned back tranquilly, and drew the rug about her.

"Thanks," she said. "What about your own quagmires, Mr. Fordyce?"

But he was ready for her.

"We wade through them, with solemn deliberation. It does n't make us as graceful to watch; but it minimizes the splashing, and we come out cleaner at the other end. What's more, we are doing our best to drain our bogs. You people are not only letting yours go; but you are inviting the rest of the nations of the earth to come and splash in them with you."

"Well," Hilda still spoke tranquilly; "what matter? They like to come, and they don't get in our way. In time, when they get through caring about the splashing, they'll probably go to work and fill up the bog for us."

"Meanwhile," Allison put in unexpectedly; "as a matter of fact, don't they get in your way?"

And Hilda answered her, with full conviction, —

"No. They never do."

Allison pursued her investigations.

"But, in the States, where you think you all are equal —"

"We don't," Don interrupted flatly, laughing at her astonished face. "That is the conventional theory

about us; but it has n't any especial basis in the real fact. We adore our friend. Our friend's friend is often a wholly different proposition. In other words, we shade by imperceptible degrees from masters of the bog down to the baby bullfrogs."

"Bravo, Rhodes!" Fordyce applauded.

Don turned to beam on him benignly.

"Glad you like it. I thought it was rather good, myself. I do a thing like that sometimes. I think it's grown on me, since I've been so much up here."

"By the way," Fordyce asked him suddenly, his eyes upon Hilda who sat opposite; "are you planning to come up, next summer?"

"If the thing comes off. Ask Hilda."

Hilda nodded. How could she be expected to dissent, after that swift, fierce instant of self-revelation which had flashed into her life, the night before, when Tremaine's fingers had grown cold against her warm ones? Now the recollection sent the blood tingling up across her cheeks.

"Of course," she answered gayly. "Do you suppose we'd stay away? After this, you'll always find us on hand, when anything is happening here in Quebec."

"But do you think it will be happening?" Don queried.

Fordyce curled up his fist, lifted it, glanced at his thumb, then raised a pair of furtive eyes to Don's.

"Confound it, man! You've made me self-conscious, and ruined one of my prettiest tricks," he protested. "The celebration? Yes. It's bound to come off; it can't well help it, with such men behind."

"Who's backing it?" Don asked him idly.

"Lots. One Governor General, one banker, one

historian, and myself," Fordyce responded modestly. "To be sure, my backing is largely of the spirit. I'm for it, heart and soul; and, in the ultimate judgment of things, a good heart and soul are far more valuable than an historian's paragraphs or a banker's millions."

"What's the good of it?" Don queried. "Aside from the fun of it, that is?"

Fordyce leaned back and crossed his arms.

"To mulct you Americans," he answered tersely. "That's the way we are getting the best of you in this, your third invasion."

With their snowshoes tucked away beneath their carter's feet, and the rugs heaped high about them, the quartette were driving up the south shore of the river, bound on a visit to the fallen, snow-buried bridge. The trip had been of Don's planning. He declared it would be of great educational value, to say nothing of the attendant good time. Moreover, it would give him a chance to use his snowshoes in real earnest. Breaking a trail to the ruins through the trackless forest would be a wholly different matter from walking out to Sillery beside the main road, or even scrambling down the cliff edge into Saint Sauveur. Moreover still, it would give him something to talk about, when the engineering fellows were holding forth in his university club at home. To be sure, his explanations might not be technical; but he would guarantee their picturesqueness. And the snow would cover most of the essential facts. Besides, it was such good sleighing now; and Tremaine himself had been responsible for the statement that the roads would be sure to soften before long.

Quite to his own satisfaction, Don had argued it all out, up in the tearoom of the rink, the night before.

Moreover, according to his invariable custom, in the end he succeeded in getting his own way. Allison would go, and Ethel Cameron, and, after some persuasion, Fordyce agreed to make the fourth. After his habit in those latter days, Fordyce put in a question in regard to Hilda. Would she not care to go? Those largest carriages easily held five. Or he could sit in front, beside the carter.

Hilda, however, when she came up the stairs with Tremaine, a little later, scoffed at the whole idea. Drive eighteen miles, for the sake of snowshoeing one! Risk breaking all their necks, for the sake of seeing with their mortal eyes the show picture of every corner photographer! Not she. She would rather sit at home and darn stockings for the far-off heathen, she protested. She did not add that, rather than spend the next day in chattering mirth and under the ozone-laden atmosphere of the wintry northland, she would much rather stay quiet in her room, hugging the memory of what that night had brought her, that night and the train of days that lay behind. Of all this she said nothing, though. It was too intangible for words, too elusive, and far, far too sacred. Instead, she made her protest concerning her choice for comfort and for safety; and the others gave in to her manifest desire that she be left alone at home. In fact, they would have given in to anything she might have desired just then, so charming was she in her dainty costume, her cheeks flushed scarlet and her eyes like stars. Always the embodiment of glowing, vivid life, to-night the whole group yielded to her unconscious domination, dazzled by her unwonted radiance.

Something of her mood had fallen over upon Tre-

maine, too. They all of them realized it; but none more keenly than did Allison Carhart who, all that winter long, had worried secretly over the new and rigid lines which time and lonely meditation had been tracing in the face of her good friend. There had been many and many an hour, earlier in the season, when she had resolved to speak out, and once for all to end the causeless reticence which lay between them, causeless since each one knew the other was aware, not only of the existence, but of the full detail of the secret concerning which neither one of them had ever cared to speak. Allison had resolved bravely; then, yet more bravely, she had cast her resolution from her. What surety had she that Tremaine would wish to have her speak? What surety that, needing sympathy, he yet would wish to take it, even from her, his oldest woman friend? And, after all, the best, most helpful sympathy was never given in words. And, more than that, what right had she to rush in, uninvited, upon Tremaine's most holy ground, the ground where he had buried the secrets of his lonely, silent life? Unlike most women, stronger by far than most, she cast aside her resolution, and continued to hold her peace. More than she reckoned it, the words of Gerrans, spoken many months before, had been a check upon her womanish emotion.

"Let him alone," he had advised her. "When he wants help, he'll yelp for it. We men all do. Till then, best let him alone."

Accordingly, Allison had let him alone, in so far as sympathetic protestations of her potential understanding lay. Tremaine, realizing her reticence and what it obviously was costing her, felt grateful. Man

like, he showed his gratitude by the fact of his accepting her attitude and herself as necessities of his day's routine, as refuges from invading acquaintances and assailing thoughts. More and more often, all that winter, he had made his escape to Allison Carhart where, over the cup of tea and the crackling fire, he dared talk or be silent, according to the mood which lay upon him.

Such friendship, such complete reliance, is wholly death to sentiment. Whatever the frame of mind which had dictated Allison's greeting to him, when he came back to town in early autumn, by midwinter she had come to count on Tremaine as a daily fact in her experience, a fact unmanageable, yet to be managed, a fact for which she cared, which, absent, she would miss, but which filled her with a deep responsibility that, in time, was doomed to oust any but the most protecting of affections. Allison was conscious of an increasing affection for this friend of hers, an increasing wish to protect him from his two sole enemies: Fate, and himself. She said little to him in these graver hours of his; she merely sat and sewed and watched him from above her work, now and then becoming acutely conscious that her throat ached a little, or that her eyes were stinging. There was nothing in particular that she could say, in hours like those. Tremaine himself sat silent, walled about by the heaviness of his own mood, sat and peered down at the fire with veiled, short-sighted eyes that saw nothing of the merry blaze before him, sat there, a still, chill, lonely presence in spirit miles and miles away from the cheery woman who sat beside him, sewing, and longing acutely to bear him company.

Of late, however, it had seemed to Allison that these hours were more infrequent. Tremaine's own moods might be in part the cause of this; in part the reason lay in the constant whirl of gayety by which the season, rushing onward towards Lent, sought to forget its own approaching doom. In those last winter weeks, there was scant time for self-searching meditation, especially for a man who, like Tremaine, was in the very heart of all the social happenings. Now and then the old mood had crept out upon him, sometimes taking him unawares, sometimes finding him too much engrossed in outside things to receive more than a hasty nod of recognition; a wave of brief dismissal. To-night, however, from all appearances, it might have departed from him, never to return, as he stood there at Hilda's side, alight, alert, alternately chaffing his friends and warding off the sympathetic questions of the mere acquaintances who sought to make their anxiety concerning his recent accident the footpath to more intimate relation.

Then the band swung off into a march once more, and the tearoom swiftly was deserted, the skaters returning to the ice, the on-lookers to their balcony. Among those last were Don and Fordyce, the latter still arguing at Hilda, as she vanished down the stairs.

As regarded the proposed trip, however, Hilda was obdurate; although, instead of arguing back again, she made her escape with Tremaine who, absorbed in watching Hilda and in talking with the others, had paid the scantest heed to Don's plan. Hilda, obdurate, had vanished at his side, leaving the others to arrange the matter as they chose. Next day, however, she

gave in and joined the expedition. Fate had been more obdurate than she; it had laid low Ethel Cameron with one of the colds consequent upon evenings spent standing about inside the rink. Ethel would have been the life and soul of the little party. Hilda read Don's disappointment in his blue eyes and, rather than see it increased by the chance of the expedition's falling through entirely, she cast truth to the winds, and insisted that, all the time, she had been really, truly keen on going. One stipulation she did make, however: that the drive be postponed until the afternoon. Just for that one morning, she felt she had a right to be alone, to nurse her new-born happiness, to weigh it, watch it, fondle it, to accept it as a part of her very self, inherent in herself, though hidden until now, and never in future to be parted from her. Just that one morning should be hers, hers and Tremaine's alone. Next instant, though, she blushed at her unpremeditated linking of their names. Not one word had been spoken, not one look exchanged between them that all the world was not free to hear and see. None — not yet.

Don had fallen victim to her kindly falsehood, and had gone away, content, to do his telephoning: sympathy to Ethel Cameron, explanations to Fordyce, and more prolix explanations to Allison Carhart. And now, the morning ended, woven into the fabric of her life, Hilda, with Allison and Don and Fordyce, smothered in furs and with the wind sharp against their faces, was driving westward to the fallen bridge.

Allison, meanwhile, was persisting in her social investigations.

"But what do you Americans do with the unaccountable people who stray into your lives?" she de-

manded. "In a country like yours, you must be always running up against them."

Hilda dismissed the implied contrast as a thing of no account. She had become quite accustomed to such implications, during the past few weeks. As a rule, they came from her feminine acquaintances, and they came less from a critical spirit than from a total lack of knowledge. Now she sought to enlighten Allison's British darkness.

"Of course, we meet them and get interested in them," she assented. "Still, with us, the mere fact that we take their problems to our bosoms does n't at all signify that we mean to ask them in for tea."

"But, if they expect it —"

"They don't, not with us. That is the glory of our republican aristocracy; we don't have to red-ink our social lines, to make sure that they are observed."

Fordyce blinked across at her, looking the while, a furry sort of owl, all fluff, and wide and shiny spectacles.

"If mere man might hazard an opinion," he suggested; "I'd say your social line, down in the States, is a good deal like a rubber band. You can stretch it as much as you like, to take in somebody from the lower side; but it's bound to come snapping back again, either to bowl him over out of your way or, if he's too strenuous a sort for that, to decapitate him utterly."

"That is about the honest truth of the matter, I suspect, Mr. Fordyce." Hilda laughed a little. Then she grew grave again. "And yet, even in our democracy where you say there are no social lines at all, we almost never come into any real contact with the undesirables. We know that they are all around us; but we never

feel them in our own lives. That is —" She hesitated, reddened.

Allison was watching her intently. Now she tossed aside the robes.

"It depends a little upon what you call the undesirable," she said lightly. "However, we may as well drop off from our philosophy and take to our feet. Stop the man, please, Mr. Rhodes. This is the best place for starting across country to the bridge."

Five minutes later, they all were floundering in the deep snow beside the road, their furs and their philosophy cast aside, their bare hands tugging at the thongs that tied their snowshoes. Then, with much chatter and laughing and discussion, they left the road behind them, crossed the gleaming fields and came into the shadow of the bare white birches which edge the cape above the ruined bridge. There they halted for discussion. Below, far, far below them lay the prostrate bridge, a string of black steel wreckage, half-buried in the river ice and pointing out across the open current. Above them slightly to the westward, the river was blocked from shore to shore with its inevitable, huge ice-pack at whose lower edge a little steamer was butting incessantly. Here and there a diminutive ice-floe, sole result of an infinite amount of fuss and of escaping steam, dislodged itself and went bobbing and twisting down along the dark blue current towards the city far below. Beyond it all, ice-floe and fussy steamer and majestic current, arose the other shore, a sheet of frosted silver in the westering sun. And, close at their feet, the cliff fell, sheer and straight, down to the water's level, far beneath.

Don scanned the prospect with disappointed eyes.

"Hang!" he said concisely. "I came to see the bridge. What's more, I intend to see it. There must be a path somewhere. Who's for going down?"

Allison and Fordyce frankly funk'd the effort, quite as frankly expected Hilda to agree with them. Hilda, however, refused to agree. To her venturesome mind, the exploit looked neither especially dangerous, nor yet too tamely easy. Moreover, Don would not insist on going down alone and keeping them all waiting for him up above. Moreover, too, the swift depression from her own heedless words, crossing the exhilaration of her morning's mood, made her feel anxious to dispel all moods whatsoever by a short interval of exercise so violent as to prevent recollection of the unwelcome thought that her own life might even find its source in undesirables. Accordingly, as was her habit every now and then, she took command of the whole expedition.

"Don, I think I'll go down with you; that is, if the others can amuse themselves up here," she added. "No; truly there can't be any danger. People must have come this way before. We'll meet you in the road, where we left the carter. Come, Don. But there's no use in keeping together. You go that way; I'll keep on here. If either one of us finds a trail, we'll whistle." And, with a nod, she was gone.

She found it just as she had supposed, a trail, possible, but so difficult as to annul all thought. Instead, she plodded on by a species of instinct which held her always towards a lower level, always intent upon the goal beneath. Once she came upon the trail of snowshoes, followed it and brought up against a wall of rock which defied her efforts to mount its slippery surface. Long since, she had become expert in the use of her

snowshoes; falls counted little, anyway, in such featherbeds of drifts as those that lay among the sheltering trees. Yielding to the exhilaration of the quest, she plodded on and on, always a little lower down the cliff, always a little nearer her objective point until, with a breathless gasp of rapture, she found herself upon a well-defined roadway through the bush, a roadway marked with the oval, long-tailed tracks left by a single pair of snowshoes.

She halted for a moment to regain her breath; then, loud and long, she sent an exultant hail to Don. There came the answering hail, faint and far distant, and she called again. Then, eager to be first upon the ground, she turned about and went speeding swiftly down the track-marked trail.

The suddenness of her arrival astounded her. Without warning of her nearness, she came out from the silent shadow of the forest to find herself close upon the ruin of the bridge, a great dead monster, lonely and very pitiful as it lay, half-buried in the snow, majestic even in its sadness. And, out upon its farthest point, hands in pockets, coat blown backward by the river's icy breath, face set upon the current flowing, flowing from the desolate ice-sheet to the happy city's portal, there stood the lonely figure of a man she knew, a slight figure, but one potent, for her eyes, to blot out all other images.

She gave a little cry of surprise, and the wind carried the cry straight to his ears. Turning, he faced her, his features glowing with a light which was not all from the golden sun, fast dropping through the primrose sky. Then swiftly and heedless of all danger, he came back to shore, striding along the slippery steelwork as

if it had been a mossy carpet. Above her head, he paused and stood there looking down upon her, the glow still in his face and in his lambent yellow eyes within whose depths there lurked no reservations.

"You?" he said slowly. "I was just dreaming about you, Hilda."

When Don, breathless with haste and snowy from neck to heel by reason of his many falls, came out from beneath the shadow of the woods, the bridge was quite deserted; but, far down below the bridge, two snowshoed figures loitered together along the ice that fringed the open river.

Later, Tremaine drove back with them. He was in his blithest mood; but Hilda, between Allison and Don, was unaccountably silent. How could she talk, indeed? Her mind was too intent upon the future, as they went speeding homeward through the twilight air, cut by the mellow Angelus which was pealing out from the little hillside churches, sending its blessing down upon her girlish plans and dreams and hopes, upon the figure sitting opposite, lonely no longer, but still potent by his mere shadow to blot out all the remainder of her world.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

FOR the average denizen of Quebec, Levis has no more concrete existence than has Levkonikon; and one may live a lifetime in the former city without ever suspecting that there is such a place as the Hotel Victoria. Nevertheless, it is there, only just across the river and close to the ferry house, a cleanly, self-respecting little hostelry where, for a consideration, one may obtain fair coffee and edible beefsteak. For a further consideration, one may even have a private room; and it was in such a private room that now two men were confronting each other.

One of the men was tall and of massive build, handsome in a certain sense. His huge head, crowned with a thatch of soft white hair, rose proudly from his shoulders which were wide and, for a man of his apparent age, singularly straight and firm. His hair hung low above his broad forehead and his keen brown eyes; a crisp white mustache shaded a hanging lower lip, and his nose, grown slightly bulbous with the passing years, was thickly crossed with a net of little scarlet veins that ran out across his cheeks to touch the edges of his large and pendulous ears. He gave the instantaneous impression of a man of birth and brains and breeding, all run a little bit to seed, of a man whose in-born keenness had been slightly, very slightly blunted by the chosen manner of his life.

And opposite him, as he sat there at his ease in a gaudy arm chair, there stood facing him another man, young, slim and alert, his eyes slightly veiled, his face at once ascetic and a little discontented, a man at every point his absolute antithesis. This younger man was Bernon Tremaine.

"You sent for me, I think?" he was saying tentatively, after the bell-boy, knocking to admit him, had closed the door and gone away.

The older man nodded slowly, almost imperceptibly, keeping his eyes, the while, fast fixed on the impenetrable face of his guest. Then, rising just as slowly, he flung away his half-burned-out cigar and extended his hand, plump and well-manicured.

"Tremaine?" he said interrogatively.

"Yes." For the life of him, Tremaine could not keep from his voice a slight note of hostility for which he was quite unable to account.

"You were good to come over at this unholy hour of the morning," the older man said genially. "Sit down."

Still moved by the same causeless dislike, Tremaine ignored the padded chair his host had pointed out, and put himself into another, a harder one and quite across the room.

"I had nothing especially pressing, this morning; and I understood from your letter, Mr. Rhodes —" The pause was also tentative.

Stuart Rhodes laughed shortly.

"That the business was important. Well, it was. As a rule, unless the need is rather urgent, a man of my age does n't dodge his doctors and come rushing home across the Atlantic and back again, when he

is supposed to be loafing about somewhere up the Nile."

"You are going back again?" Tremaine asked, in some surprise.

"I sail from Halifax, to-morrow afternoon. I am leaving here, to-night. That's why I was so anxious that you should come, this morning. I am sorry to have troubled you to come across here," he added courteously; "but I had reasons of my own for not caring to go over to Quebec." The words were spoken carelessly, negligently. Then, without warning, there came a change of tone. "Mr. Tremaine, I think that you know my son."

"Yes."

"And that you are seeing him often."

"Yes."

"Nearly every day."

Tremaine bowed his assent to the words which, instead of being questioning, were strongly assertive.

"And that," for one instant, the loose lower lip came hard against its mate; "that you have regarded my request to say nothing to him about my being here."

"Until I had seen you — yes," Tremaine said quietly.

The bushy white brows met in a sudden frown.

"Why that modifying clause, Mr. Tremaine?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Why do you limit it, and say *until*?"

Tremaine's short-sighted amber eyes met the intent brown ones before them without a hint of wavering.

"Because," he answered, with a sort of cool obstinacy; "I must know clearly the reason for this remarkable request, before I grant it."

The words were spoken in all dignity; none the less, Stuart Rhodes smiled a little as he listened, smiled with a touch of satisfied approval.

"It might tend to complicate things a little, if you did tell Don," he said.

The smile irritated Tremaine. He felt he was working in the dark, and plainly at the mercy of this prosperous, easy-going, yet authoritative man who had something in his mind of which he would tell as much or as little as he chose. The smile increased his own sense of disadvantage.

"What things?" he asked sternly.

The man smiled again.

"Relations," he answered concisely. Then, scratching a match, he lighted a fresh cigar.

For a minute or two, he smoked in utter silence. He eyed Tremaine keenly, the while, through the thin veil of smoke. He took heedful note of the pale brown hair and eyes, of the thin, firm lips, of the whole mask-like face, still and impassive. Then he nodded to himself in slow approval. This was the man he wanted, the man whom he could trust, the man whom he had journeyed across the wintry seas to meet, and know. And influence? Rhodes shook his head. Of that point he was far less sure. He needed to gain some sort of influence over this stripling who sat erect before him and watched him out of those confounded yellow eyes which saw so much and betrayed nothing, unless perhaps a lurking dislike and lack of confidence.

It was essential to his plans that Tremaine should feel his power, should yield to it, yield implicitly. But how make him? That was the question. Forecast the situation often, as he inevitably had done during

the days-long crossing of the stormy winter seas, Stuart Rhodes had never once foreseen the possibility of meeting this innate hostility, this grave, judicial questioning of his own right to dominate the coming interview. All his life, Stuart Rhodes had dominated people and things, easily, gayly perhaps, but still inexorably. His personality had helped him to this end; that, and his money, and his position in the social and business worlds. He had not only had what he considered to be the best of everything; but he had seen to it that the best should be served out to him according to the caprices of his appetites. Because his orders had been given with a smile, they had been orders just the same. No one had ever dared to question them, nor yet to question his right to give them. Throughout his world, his will had reigned supreme.

It never once had occurred to him that Bernon Tremaine would fail to recognize his supremacy. For so long a time, Rhodes had regarded this supremacy as inherent in himself, unassisted by any worldly considerations, that he had taken it quite for granted that Tremaine would so regard it, too. He had been at great pains to find out things about Tremaine. For some time, now, the gaining of this information had been part of a well-ordered plan which had found its climax in this hasty trip across the ocean. How he had found them out was a secret which concerned no one but himself who paid the bills. Suffice it that he had found them, and that, in the main, he had judged them satisfactory.

He had learned, among all else, that Tremaine was not yet thirty, not a man of hobbies nor of too social tastes; that he was steady, unassuming, going his

rather isolated way in a quiet fashion which gave no especial hint of character beneath. In short, from all accounts, he was the typical young engineer of middle-class extraction, sedate by reason of the absence of allurements rather than by conviction, steady because as yet life had offered him no great incentive to deviate from his rather narrow path. Stuart Rhodes had summed up the details in a mood of supreme content. Upon a man such as Tremaine was reported to be, the inducements, the allurements he would have to offer would be the more potent because of their being so unprecedented in the young engineer's restricted life.

To his extreme surprise, Rhodes had come face to face with a new fact, as yet unknown to science. The details might be all right; their resultant total, albeit correctly added up, might be all wrong. This was no plastic, unsophisticated boy who faced him now, a world of distrust in his yellow eyes; rather, it was a man, logical, judicial, inflexible as flint. Swiftly, while he smoked, Stuart Rhodes was recasting all his preconceived opinions, modifying much of his premeditated plan. He must work cautiously, undermining suspicion, not seek to capture liking, as one seeks to snatch an apple dangling on the nearest tree.

Pacing the steamer's deck from end to end and smoking an unreckoned number of black cigars, bit by bit Stuart Rhodes had planned out two distinct lines of conversation, one or the other of which, as he saw fit, should be followed out, that morning in the Victoria Hotel. He had reached Levis, late the night before. Late as it was, he had sent a messenger with a note to Tremaine's room; then he had sat up later

still, studying the talk before him, studying, too, an hour afterwards, every curving, dashing line of the handwriting in the answer the messenger had brought him. Above the handwriting, his brows had lowered a little. The long crossing of the *s*s, the nervous tails to the dropped letters bespoke determination. Then his brow cleared. What was a boy's determination, matched against the things he had to offer? His eyes were smiling and his lip was hanging loosely, as if with a supreme content, by the time he flung himself between the coarse white sheets, preparatory to the sleep which, however, did not come.

Now, face to face at last with Tremaine, the doubts renewed themselves a little. Like the nervous tails to the dropped letters, Tremaine's face showed determination. During the moments that he smoked in silence, Rhodes was swiftly reviewing his outlined conversations, weighing them swiftly in the light of a first-hand knowledge of the man before him. Then, his eyes still upon Tremaine's face, he nodded swiftly. His mind was made up. True to his first plan, he would follow out the line of least resistance, would undermine distrust, rather than fight against it. Tremaine might be determined, might even prove to be a bit mulish. However, what was the mulishness of a boy like that, untrained in any but the meagre life of the paltry little city over yonder? A matter of pure theory, rather than experience, it would yield to the first touch of outside pressure. The gentler, in fact, the pressure, and the more alluring, the more potent it would be. Behind the smoke veil, the face of Stuart Rhodes cleared suddenly. He lowered his cigar, and flung aside his sternness.

"Mr. Tremaine," he said, with recurrent cordiality; "I used the word *relations* advisedly. It's a broad word, and it includes a good many things, racial ones as well as business. I may speak to you in confidence?"

"Of course," Tremaine assured him dryly.

"Very well. Then I can count on you? You know Don. You may also know something about my business? No? I thought Don might have told you. I am — well, what they call a Wall Street magnate." The genial mockery of his laugh robbed the phrase of any egotism. Then he resumed his downright, decisive manner, a manner which was intended to allow Tremaine to form some notion of his latent power. "Knowing Don, you can form a general theory of the use he is to me in my business. I need him, too. My interests are large, increasing; lately I have taken on some new things, things in the Philippines. It had been my dream to give these over into Don's hands; but he's not the man to put them through. Neither, to tell the truth, is he the man to go so far from home, even for the sake of the tremendous interests at stake. For a year and a half, I have had him in my office, under my own eye. For six months, I have been hunting in vain for a man to send out in his place, a man who could be put in full local control, a man on whom I could rely to develop my interests as if they were his own."

There came a little pause. Then, —

"Well?" Tremaine said, and the brief syllable was pregnant with interrogation.

"From all that my son has written — and his letters have been full of you — I think you are the man I want. I think so more," the brown eyes swept over

him slowly, steadily; "now that I see you with my own eyes."

This time, the pause lengthened to a silence, before Tremaine spoke.

"Then why keep the matter such a secret?" he inquired.

Stuart Rhodes smiled, and his voice dropped down an octave.

"Mr. Tremaine, Don is all I have in the world. I can't hurt him by letting him know that I must choose another man to fill what, by right, should be his place."

"But he is sure to know."

"How?"

"If I am sent out there to manage your interests."

Stuart Rhodes lifted one plump hand, white beneath its plain seal ring.

"But he has no way of knowing that they are my interests," he said, with a slow insistence that seemed thrusting the words, one by one, down into the very depths of Tremaine's memory and understanding. "Remember that a man, placed as I have been, is more or less bound to have ties in all sorts of unknown and unexplored directions. So long as I am able to be at the helm of things, I see no need of thrusting details on other people, except in so far as they, or I, may need. When the proper time comes, my papers will show everything, everything. In the meantime —"

"In the meantime," Tremaine cut in a little too sternly, considering the difference in their ages; "in the meantime, you propose to keep from your son a secret that, in the end, he must know; that, in the end, you know will hurt him?"

Under the eyes of his youthful censor, Stuart Rhodes smiled easily, although his ruddy cheeks flushed to a deeper red.

"Oh, for the matter of that, once I am dead and gone, you can settle up the score in any way you choose," he answered, with a lightness which somehow failed to ring quite true. Then, bending forward, he broke off his point of ash with slow, deliberate care.

Tremaine waited until Rhodes was once more erect and facing him, waited again until the next inevitable funnel of smoke had come from between his lips. Then he asked low and quite steadily, —

"Mr. Rhodes, what is the real reason you are offering me this thing?"

"Because I need your help," Rhodes answered carelessly; but the fingers which held the smouldering cigar shook a little.

"Why mine?"

"Because you are the man best fitted for it."

Tremaine pushed his questions one or two points further.

"But there are other men in plenty, men of your own country, better men than I. Why have you come up here to choose me, a foreigner?"

"Because I liked what Don has written of you," Rhodes made answer a bit doggedly. "Don may not be a financier; but he is judge of stuff in men."

Tremaine disregarded the implied compliment; disregarded, too, the explanation. Instead, —

"And does it occur to you, Mr. Rhodes, that even now you have neglected to tell me, a professional civil engineer and nothing else, just what your mysterious interests are?"

This time, Stuart Rhodes winced. The intent eyes fixed upon him lost nothing of the flinching. Tremaine rose; but Rhodes sought to anticipate a further move on his part by his next carefully careless words.

"What sort of interests could one have inside the Philippines, Tremaine? One does n't go in for model tenements, or for subways there, yet awhile. I supposed there would be no need to specify. Of course, it's railroads, plus a mine or two; things just exactly in your line. Sit down, unless you are in too great a hurry. I'd like to talk it over with you a little."

But Tremaine did not sit down.

"Of course," he spoke formally, coldly; "I am bound to appreciate the honour you do me in making me this offer. However, in my line or not, I must refuse it absolutely."

Rhodes sat upright in his chair, dropping his cigar, as he did so.

"Refuse? Are you crazy?"

"Not at all."

"Then, why?"

"Merely because I choose to stay here."

"You refuse to go? Refuse a chance which can't fail to bring you in a reputation, a colossal fortune?"

Tremaine bowed his head in deliberate assent.

"I do, unless —"

The cigar, fallen on the sheet of a morning paper, was smudging fast; but both men now were far too much in earnest to heed the wisp of smoke which came coiling, snake like, up between them; too much in earnest even to heed the swift elisions by which, disregarding interlying explanation, they had reached the final question.

"Unless?" Stuart Rhodes lingered on the latter syllable, throwing upon it all of his powerful personality, enlarging it, until it held within it question, passion, even intimidation.

"Unless," Tremaine spoke quietly, his level young voice forming curious contrast with the threatening vehemence of the other; "unless you will tell me frankly just why it is that you have crossed the Atlantic on purpose to make me this astounding offer."

The seared edge of the paper caught fire at last, and flashed up in a sudden tongue of flame. With an impatient, yet deliberate, crash of his falling foot, Rhodes stamped it out, just as he would have liked to stamp out any attempted opposition on the part of Bernon Tremaine. That done, he faced Tremaine again, and spoke, low, and looking out at him from between narrowed lids.

"Very well," he said slowly. "I will tell you. But remember it was you who insisted. Sit down, though, for the story is a long one. It will take a little time."

A half hour later, Tremaine rose to his feet once more; but now his motions had lost the vigour that had characterized them earlier. He moved slowly, inertly; his eyes were dull and his face, like an impenetrable mask, lacked every vestige of expression. Only his hands betrayed his nervous strain. These showed it, not by any gesture, but by their rigid stillness as they hung, half open, by his sides. Deliberately he crossed to the window and stood there, looking out upon the heavy air, dotted with falling snowflakes and surcharged with the steam escaping from an engine waiting on the tracks below. Only when snow and steam had vanished behind a wall of thick black

smoke did he turn about. When next he spoke, his voice was very still.

"And Miss Lynde?" he queried. "Is — is she in this, too?"

As he spoke, he dropped his eyes, as if loath to fix them on the man who sat before him, pale now, and breathing rather heavily. His glance dropped too soon for him to see Rhodes wince, look across at him stealthily, as if seeking to probe his hidden thought, then rally to the unspoken challenge that lay behind the question, a challenge which, however, he only vaguely understood.

"Hilda? No. She is quite outside of all this thing."

"But, if she is Don's cousin?"

"She is n't." Once more Rhodes spoke lightly, as if seeking to put an end to disagreeable questions by his very unconcern.

Tremaine had faced back to the window. Now he spun about on his heel.

"What is she, then?" he demanded curtly.

Stuart Rhodes rose to his feet and stood there facing him, his hands thrust into the side pockets of his short gray coat.

"I am not altogether sure," he remarked a little insolently; "that I am bound to answer you. Still, you know so much about it, you may as well know it all. Then perhaps you may be satisfied to let the matter rest. Hilda happens to be a child whom I adopted, child of a friend of mine who died and left her without a mother and without a cent to her name."

The breath seemed rushing back into Tremaine's lungs, as to a man on the very verge of suffocation. A

faint light, too, came into his heavy eyes; but his voice lost nothing of its sternness.

"And that is really all?" he asked.

And the other man assented, —

"Yes, that is really all."

For a moment, Tremaine's left hand shut hard upon the projecting edge of the window casing; and there was an almost imperceptible quivering of his thin, firm lips. Then he rallied and raised his head.

"I have your word for it, your word as a gentleman?" he asked, his very lack of accent lending untold stress to the short question.

"Do you doubt me, Tremaine?"

For his sole answer, Tremaine let his eyes fall directly on the brown ones before him; and the brown ones dropped, full of ineffable shame, full, too, of an unspoken agony of remorse that such an hour as this should ever have come upon him. Then the silence dropped upon the room.

At last, when the endurance of the two men was worn to the breaking-point, Rhodes took a slow step forward, spoke still more slowly.

"These are the ties as they are made," he said gravely. "It would be a confession of weakness on my part to break them now; to try to break them, that is. Now that at last I have been forced into telling you the truth, can I count on you to keep my secret safe in your hands?"

Tremaine bowed his head.

"You can," he answered, after an instant.

Then, regardless of the hand which Rhodes was holding out to him, he turned away without another word and left the room.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"**B**UT you were n't afraid," he told her.
"Only when it groaned, and creaked, and opened out in little cracks all around us. Then I thought that my last hour had come. I wanted to cry, and to hold your hand; but I did n't know as it would be quite genteel." Her eyes added the quote-marks for the unlovely word.

Man like, he sought to allay even her retrospective fears.

"It was only the beginning of the rising tide," he reassured her.

"So I found out, later on," she answered, with a stealthy amusement at her own nonchalant repartee. Then she dismissed her allegory, after a hasty glance at the intent face of her companion. "Don had told me you were a peach," she added; "but really," her dimples came distractingly; "I must say you did n't look it, when you picked me up."

Perforce, Tremaine burst out laughing at the frankness of her criticism.

"How did I look?" he queried.

"As if Fate had cast a white elephant into your pathway," she told him quickly; "and then had failed to provide you with the necessary zoo."

As so often happened, they were talking of their first afternoon together. In the four weeks which had

passed away since that wintry afternoon, they had gone over its details again and again, always hilariously, and yet on Tremaine's side, with an odd little feeling of predestination. Now that, after an almost infinite number of delays and postponements, Don and Hilda had definitely fixed their departure for the first of the following week, the hilarity had ebbed a little. It had ebbed still more since Tremaine's trip to Levis, on the previous morning. It rose again, though, in answer to Hilda's chaff.

Hilda had chosen her words with some degree of care. She had felt the need to lighten the depression which lay upon them both, that afternoon, a causeless depression, she told herself, especially so for Bernon Tremaine. For herself? Her place was to hold herself quiescent, waiting, ready to receive whatever came. Her whole maidenly modesty retreated from the thought of meeting Tremaine half way; of letting him know, even, that she too shared his depression at their approaching separation. As for him, the cure for the depression rested in his own hands.

That Bernon Tremaine loved her, Hilda had not the slightest doubt. That, when the right time came, he would ask her to marry him, she doubted just as little. And yet, not one single word had ever passed between them which could drive that belief home and clinch it. Neither Tremaine nor she were committed to anything whatsoever. None the less, loath as she would have been to admit it, even to herself, during the last few days Hilda Lynde had been resting contented in the surety of Tremaine's love, a love which transcended words, but spoke out in every look and touch, every accent and every gesture. The knowledge of

this thing had been coming to her slowly, she knew now; but it had seemed to burst upon her all at once, that night in the skating rink, when Tremaine's hand had grown cold on hers. Looking backward now, she could see it coming from the first, coming in the strange sense of mutual understanding which had marked all their intercourse. As she had told him, only a moment before, that first afternoon upon the ice-road had been the beginning of the rising tide, a tide which now was sweeping up upon them both, a tide which, so her woman's intuitions all assured her, would end by sweeping them away upon its bosom, into the unknown, uncharted sea.

However, that time still lay far before them. As yet, Tremaine had made no definite confession of his love; as yet, her only part to play had been the one of quiet acquiescence. Even that night in the rink, even that sunset hour upon the beach, next day, Tremaine had made no definite mention of the love which, they both knew, was throbbing in his veins, calling forth the answering throb in hers. Their talk had been personal, subjective; but there are divers subjective things apart from love itself which can fill up a conversation, under circumstances such as those, things which can be completely in the shadow of a love whose substance is yet wholly disregarded. Tremaine and Hilda had talked about the figures of the carnival, had expressed their pleasure at their unexpected meeting at the bridge, had delivered prolix explanation of the way the meeting could have come about, had talked about Tremaine's lame wrist, about Don's latest bulletin concerning their departure. That was really all.

Nevertheless, driving home through the winter twi-

light, with the Angelus clashing in their ears, neither Tremaine nor Hilda were aware of any doubts regarding their common future, nor yet of any doubts that their common future had been predestined since eternity was first created. Its actual fulfilment was within their grasp; it was now the merest matter of time. Measured by the spirit, their knowledge of each other had been endless. Measured by the calendar? Hilda counted swiftly backwards. Measured by the calendar, it had extended over four weeks and four days. She smiled, and shook her head. Absurd to — She stumbled at the word. Then, glancing at Tremaine beside her, she went on unflinchingly to the end of her thought. To get engaged, on such a short acquaintance as that! The world, her world at home, would say, and rightly, that she was insane, had lost her head completely. The world's verdict was worth the heeding, too, if only for the sake of what came after. And Don, too, would scoff, much as he liked Tremaine. But waiting counted little, judged by the measure of their mutual, their perfect comprehension of their unspoken love.

Hilda was deliriously happy, that afternoon. Don was off on some all-day expedition or other with Gervase Gerrans. All that morning, Hilda had sat alone in her room, pretending to read, but really letting her book lie, unheeded, in her lap, while she sat and dreamed of the change the past few days had been making in the colour of her life. Always admired by the many, always liked and even loved by the few, Hilda Lynde had never known a great, overmastering affection in her life; none, that is, besides her love for Don. And that had been a little different, a little too matter of

course, a little too much demanded by the outward aspects of the case, to be entirely satisfactory. Of course, whatever else might come, she would always rely on Don, always love him and need his love back again. But, from her little childhood, there always had been Don, planted in the direct pathway of all her outgoing affection. She could not conceive the not loving Don intensely; she could think of nothing that ever would break, or interrupt, their love. In its place, it satisfied her completely. Nevertheless she could dream of yet another place, as yet unfilled, a place not a mere adjunct of her present daily life, but remoter, incidental.

From the first, she had recognized Tremaine's inherent strength. Now, looking backward, she prided herself a little on the recognition. Most girls, she told herself, would have been chilled by his unresponsive personality, would even have been a little alienated by his ugly, inexpressive face, would have been antagonized by his odd mannerisms which, at the start, had ruffled even her composure. Even she had clashed with him at first. Then, realizing his spiritual aloofness from his mates, she had treated him with a gay frankness which had sought to set him at his ease, even while it had been designed to cloak her real indifference. Bit by bit, as she had known him better, she had discovered that his cubbishness was little more than skin deep; that it was the cover he assumed to hide his sense of his own isolation, his craving for toleration, interest, affection. She had passed through all these three stages, herself; had come to the final one of them all. And, best of all, her intuitions, acute and trained to judge according to the noblest standards, assured her

that Tremaine was worthy of the love she gave him. He might be cubby, brusque, even uncompromisingly rude at times; but of the cleanness of his standards there was no room for doubt. As soon would she have doubted Don himself.

Yes, he was all a man, cleanly of life, clear of brain and steady of nerve. Of the mere worldly fact that he was a young engineer whose future was all before him, and that she was the adopted child of one of New York's rich men, she took no heed. Even if she had thought about it, she would have dismissed the idea as a thing of no account. Love in a cottage might have its ugly corollaries; but the corollaries could be buried from sight and hearing beneath the love. And Tremaine loved her, loved her, loved her. And, what was more, she loved him back again. And, what was still more yet, she knew within her secret heart that each was conscious of the other's love.

She tossed her neglected book into a chair and, clasping her hands behind her head, she sat there motionless, her eyes upon the river beneath the window, the deep, mysterious river which came out of some hidden, far-off source, to grow and grow until, swollen to a majestic stream, it went rushing on its way to seek the soundless, boundless sea. Her cheeks were flushed scarlet and her eyes glowed softly, when at last she stirred, unclasped her hands and slowly, reluctantly dismissed her dreams.

Later, luncheon over, she dressed for the street and went out across the court. She felt the need of action, exercise, something to still the tumult in her, lest otherwise her exultation break out in some absurd demonstration of her happiness. She stopped to mail a letter

at the post office, paused in the lee of the doorway to adjust a hatpin, and then, as she started down the steps, she met Tremaine just going in.

"Where now?" he asked her, with the boyish, unceremonious directness she had grown to like so well.

"For a walk. I am not sure where."

He glanced at his watch.

"Then wait till I mail these letters, and come around the Ramparts. It's always good, down there, and you may as well escort me on my way."

"Your way?"

"Yes. I'm bound for the Hôtel-Dieu."

"Wh. . . ." Her off-hand directness matched his own.

He hesitated for just an instant. The hesitation was in perfect accord with the veiling of his eyes, the abstraction of his whole demeanour which Hilda had noticed in her first glance at him, as he came towards her up the steps. Noticing, it disturbed her a little, too. She had supposed that, between them, such moods were for ever at an end. However, she was far too wise by now to show him that she was aware of any reservation. Instead, she pursued him gayly with another question.

"A professional visitation, or a social call?" she demanded, breaking in upon his hesitation.

His hesitation vanished before his laugh.

"Both," he assured her. "I am going to see my nun nurse."

"Sister St. Saba? Is n't she a dear? Be sure you give her my — What do you send to nuns, in place of love?" she pondered aloud. "Well, give it to her, anyway. But what do you want of her? You are n't

ill again, I trust." Then the laughter left her voice. "You have n't done anything to your wrist?" Her tone sharpened suddenly on the words.

Tremaine shook his head.

"Nothing. Really, it is almost as good as ever, Miss Lynde. I wish I could prove it to you, short of a boxing bout. But — but the nun was very good to me, you know, and I thought — "

Hilda ended his sentence for him

"You thought you'd go in and thank her? Really, that's rather nice of you, Mr. Tremaine. Most men don't stop to do those little things, and I know Sister St. Saba will appreciate it. Besides, even from the little I saw of her, I know you were rather her pet patient. You have n't seen her since, of course? Then you are sure to get a welcome. And be sure you tell her you met me on the way, and that I sent her my best greetings." Then, nodding carelessly, she dismissed Sister St. Saba into the limbo of things that are done and disposed of once for all, and fell upon the discussion of more worldly matters.

Among them, in due time, came the discussion of her own departure. This only followed, though, the rest of their talk, came as a sort of corollary to the other things, came quite against Hilda's will. Throughout their leisurely circuit of the Ramparts, she had done her best to hold herself aloof from the gravity which dominated the mood of her companion, had done her best, too, to lure him out of it, or, failing that, to discover its cause. She had been worsted in both of these endeavours; and, at the very end, she was worsted in her own determination to keep her merry, care-free talk unbroken till they went their separate ways.

She could not make out Tremaine's mood in the least. As a rule, she had found out, his worst half-hours came from inside himself. Now, on the contrary, he seemed depressed and oppressed by some outside worry which he was manifestly bent on keeping hidden from her eyes. He laughed at her jokes; but the laugh was plainly manufactured. He answered all her talk; but the answers were brief, a little absent, albeit in their proper places. And, when she last had seen him, only two nights before, he had been wellnigh as care-free and irresponsible, as bubbling with good spirits as Gerrans himself. Question as she would the chances of the intervening time, she could think of nothing which should have arisen to account for such a change.

In spite of herself, bit by bit she had yielded to his mood. The talk had lagged perceptibly from the brisk pace at which she had done her best to keep it. Their physical pace had lagged as well. They had walked more and more slowly, until at last they had come to a halt, and stood side by side, gazing out across the city wall, now just below the level of the snow-filled roadway, out across the glistening Beauport Flats, down to the blue rampart of the mountains which ringed in the northern view. Close at their feet, the smoke from many pointed, dormer-studded roofs rose up in thin, straight funnels across the windless air. On one of the roofs, a man with a long-handled mallet was pounding away at the packed and heaped-up snow. Beside him, in a wee, square dormer, a woman clung to the end of the life-line looped about his waist. Her garnet shawl, his scarlet tippet made the sole bits of colour against the whites and grays of snow and sky, against the sombre brown tones of the huddled roofs, just as they

and their slender life-line furnished the only human note in all the great, bleak picture opening out before them. And, Hilda noted with absent and incurious eyes, it was the woman's place to hold the life-line. Afterwards, long months after, she remembered it again.

"I really don't know why it is," she was saying slowly to Tremaine; "that I hate to leave this place as I do. It's not alone that I have had, that you have given me, a glorious time, though I have appreciated it all, every bit. But I've come to have an odd, superstitious feeling that the city is a part of me, in my blood; that always it has been on the cards that I should come here, and learn to love it, and come and come again." Her voice trailed off into silence. Then she roused herself abruptly, and as by an effort of her will. "Don really is making his plans to come back again, this summer," she said briskly.

Tremaine turned his eyes upon her quickly.

"And you?" he made brief question.

"I, of course." She laughed as lightly as she could, for her heart was once more bumping wildly, just as it had done, days before, in the rink and at the bridge. "You need n't think that I would ever let Don come up here without me. Besides, I heard him tell Miss Carhart, last night, that he has engaged our rooms for all of July. That sounds rather final, and it's not so far away that I ought to be quite disconsolate at the prospect of our going home now."

"No; but we may be," Tremaine said slowly. "It is n't quite the first of March; and so much can happen, between now and then."

"Can; but is n't likely to," she answered, as she turned away from the gleaming, blue-walled landscape.

"Or do you expect to go back into the field again? Brrrr! Those blue hills look as if they meant a storm. How cold they are! It makes me shiver to look at them."

Tremaine smiled, as if at a child's sudden whim.

"Then look the other way," he advised her.

In mock and exaggerated obedience, she turned completely round towards the low gray wall beside her. An instant later, she was facing straight ahead, an odd, scared look in her pale brown eyes, strained lines around her unsmiling lips.

"Come," she said abruptly. "I am keeping you from your engagement."

But Tremaine halted.

"Miss Lynde," he said, with sudden gravity; "something startled you. What was it?"

She dismissed his question with a forced little laugh.

"Imagination. That is really all, Mr. Tremaine. I may as well confess the ignominious fact that I am a little nervous, to-day. Too many cups of tea, perhaps."

He urged the question home.

"But what did you imagine?"

She smiled into his waiting eyes, ashamed already of her own foolish fear.

"It was that little bit of a window in the wall. It always has been a horror to me, with its curly grated spikes, always has seemed to me to stand for everything that is shut away inside, all the buried secrets and the — the other things that one associates with nuns. I've been past it often with Don; I always dread it, too. I know I am foolish; but — well, I just am." Hilda's laugh would have disarmed any criticism.

"And to-day?" Tremaine asked, with unwavering persistence.

"How unkind to lay bare my folly!" she objected. "Well, if you must have it, I imagined I could see a nun's face peering out at me, watching me, while I talked to you." She laughed again. "Is n't it a sign of the artistic temperament to have such an imagination?" she demanded, with reawakened gayety.

But Tremaine's answering laugh was mirthless. He was quite well aware that there had been no need for any exercise of the imagination.

Sister St. Saba was dull, that day. Her eyes were heavy, when she greeted Tremaine, her voice husky, as with a sudden cold. For a time, she talked at random: asked for his wrist, his general health, his interests both personal and professional. And Tremaine's replies, his answering conversation, these were just as much at random. It was plain that, for a time, they both were talking merely to conceal their thoughts. In the end, however, Sister St. Saba came directly to the point, came so suddenly as to find Tremaine completely off his guard.

"I expected you earlier," she said. "Was your walk a pleasant one?"

He rallied instantly from his surprise.

"Very," he answered just a little coldly. "I saw you watching us."

"And Miss Lynde? She enjoyed it?" Sister St. Saba spoke quite calmly, although her cheeks flushed pink beneath the blow of his rebuke.

"She seemed to, until the very last." Tremaine's voice was colder than Sister St. Saba had ever heard it before. "She also saw you watching us."

"And why not, Bernon?" The woman, not the nun, spoke in her accent.

"No reason at all," he answered briefly. "It was only a little unexpected; that was all."

The silence fell between them, broken only by the seconds that seemed dropping, one, and one, and one, and one, from the clock hanging on the wall outside. Then Sister St. Saba raised her head and looked straight into Tremaine's yellow eyes.

"Bernon, do you love that girl?" she asked him.

He straightened his shoulders, and all the manliness within him flashed to his eyes, as if to meet a challenge.

"As I love, not my life, but my very hopes of heaven," he made solemn answer.

The nun's eyes fell before his grave reply. There was an interval before she spoke again. Then, —

"And she?" she questioned. "Does she love you?"

Again the answer startled her, less by its vehemence than by its reverent gravity.

"I believe, and pray, that she does."

The nun's lips stiffened for a moment and, with her well-known gesture, her fingers shut upon the swaying cross.

"Bernon, have you told her that you love her?" she asked him breathlessly.

"Not yet."

"But you will?"

"When the time comes," he told her, still with the same solemnity which she felt as a would-be barrier, striving to lift itself between them. "For many reasons, it is best for me to wait a little while."

Low, but resonant, his voice seemed filling the room around her. Its sound, its echoes crowded on her ears,

dizzying her brain with its impact and smothering every other sound, save that made by the falling of the passing seconds, one, and one, and one, and one. Scores of them passed by, and hundreds, and still Sister St. Saba sat motionless, her face drawn and grayish white inside its frame of linen bands, her lips unsteady, and her hand shut hard, hard upon the silver cross. Tremaine watched in silent pity, sure that he knew the secret of her hidden agony; sure, also, that, while the secret would be always safe with him, the agony itself would yield to time. He even smiled a little to himself. Nun or worldling, they all were women, all alike, all a little jealous of some unique place they sought to hold as theirs alone. Indeed, he would not have had it otherwise. So sure was he of the truth of his belief that he allowed his smile to widen, to linger, while Sister St. Saba raised her head. Then it vanished, driven away by sheer pity for the anguish written on her face.

"Yes," she was echoing slowly, drearily; "yes. It is best for you to wait a little while, best for many, many reasons."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

HILDA LYNDE, once on a time, had called Sister St. Saba the living embodiment of peace.

No peace was in Sister St. Saba's manner now, however, nor yet within her heart, as, Tremaine gone, she hurriedly left the parlour and, after her usual custom when she was disturbed in spirit, flung herself upon the duties laid down in her daily routine. As a rule, these humdrum duties, duties for the most part within the wards where a cheery exterior was a matter of humane necessity, as a rule, these duties were enough to drive away any frets and worries which could creep into her cloistered life. The very need of showing a calm, bright face to the suffering around her, to the novices beneath her own especial care, usually recalled her sharply to her wonted busy, happy self-control. Like every other woman, cloistered or in the world, Sister St. Saba had long ago found out that work was the great steadier of disordered nerves.

To-day, however, the trouble went deeper far than that. It was no mere attack of nerves, no bit of feminine jealousy, left over from her younger days when the world and its caprices surrounded her on every hand, no pique to find herself relegated to a place apart from Tremaine's full confidence, which had curved her fingers about her silver cross in that clutch of passion-

ate emotion. Tremaine had so interpreted it; but, though knowing Sister St. Saba well, his interpretation had gone quite wide of the mark. Neither nerves nor pique had caused that sudden keen emotion; but something infinitely deeper, something whose sources were as yet mercifully hidden from his sight.

Not from hers, though. Shut her eyes as she would, the vision still pursued her, frightful in itself, frightful in its remotest consequences. Never had Sister St. Saba foreseen these consequences among the possibilities conceived by the malignest Fate. Never, that is, until within the past few months. Even then, she had not feared them; she had only known a dull, ugly dread, subconscious and quite removed from any fear. And now, all at once, passing the middle stage entirely, the dread had suddenly become the fact. She sought to disregard it, to turn away and treat it as a thing of no account. Instead, it leaped out at her, a present horror which led to many sorts of future complications. It faced her, whichever way she turned, fell upon her, paralyzed her brain and nerve and heart.

In vain, she hurled herself into the detail of her work. For the hour, her work slid over her mind, as water slides along a window pane. The needs of a patient in the fever ward; the unexpected call to oversee the nurses who were detailed to hand the instruments through the wicket that led into the glazed and barren whiteness of the operating-room; the sudden loss of the almost microscopic electric bulb which, hidden in the long, shining tube, was destined to illuminate the darksome caverns of a waiting stomach; the dropping down on her white serge knees to hunt about the slippery floor, while the head surgeon, from across the

wicket, issued bulletins of his increasingly urgent needs: none of this seemed able to penetrate her brain, to rouse her interest. Like the tiny lamp for which she searched, the dazzling light of fear had probed her mind and, by comparison, its glare seemed to have extinguished every lesser light. She searched long, but clumsily and with a total lack of reason that made her powerless to distinguish between possible hiding places and impossible, while the surgeon watched her narrowly and wondered what could be the matter with his star nurse, the collected, tranquil nun, Sister St. Saba. And, when at last she found it in the shadow of the folds that covered her left knee, her fingers shook, until she dropped it once and still again, before she placed it safely in the surgeon's outstretched hand.

Again he eyed her narrowly, forgetting, for the instant, his waiting patient. Patients came and went. Sister St. Saba was always there, always reliable. If she went on her nerves — He shook his gray head. Then, tiny lamp in hand, he returned to his patient.

Sister St. Saba went away out of the room. She went into one of the wards, answered vaguely a question or two from the nurse in charge, spoke a vague word or two to one of the patients who accosted her. Then she went on again. The human life around her fretted her, although she seemed to perceive it dimly, as through a mental veil. None the less, she felt an increasingly imperative need to break away from it, to escape to some place where she could be alone and undisturbed by outward claims on her attention. Inevitably the hour was coming nearer when she must be left to herself to face her secret horror with what bravery she could. She knew the hour before her would be fraught with

agony, perchance with danger to her reason. She longed to have it over, ended; yet, in the next instant, she shrank from its beginning. What if it should be too strong for her to master? What if, in the final end, it should destroy her reason? She wondered how it would feel to be going mad. How it would feel to be mad, like the young girl she had helped to nurse, last year. She had supposed all questions such as that had ended for her, for ever, when she had spoken her last holy vows. The nun's life was the life of incessant peace, they all had told her. And she was a nun. She had been a nun for fully a score of years. Peace? Peace! How could one ever really hope to gain it? How, gaining it, could one be sure it would be lasting? Every hour, departing, leaves its ghost behind it. What prayers could ever lay those ghosts, could exorcise their spells?

With a hurried tread, quite alien to her usual soft padding, Sister St. Saba left the ward and turned in the direction of the choir. There, in the holy silence, in the shadow of the great high altar, she knelt behind the grating, burying her face within her hands. Down through the western windows, the vivid outer light came filtering in, softened, as if purified, came to illuminate the painted Stations of the Cross, to rest in golden glory upon the gleaming circle of the monstrance. Sister St. Saba raised her head a moment to gaze upon the holy emblems of her faith. Then her head dropped back upon her hands again. Faith, for the hour, must yield to pitiless, insistent logic. She must think it all out, herself included, from the shadowy beginning to the flaming horror of the end. All! All! Everything! Her head fell lower yet, until the black veil, dropping

forward, seemed seeking to cover her from sight beneath its dusky, sombre folds.

A moment later, she lifted her head, crossed herself, rose from her knees and made swift genuflection. Then she went away. Another nun had come to kneel beside her, a younger nun, peaceful, devout and smiling, who fell to whispering her prayers with a half-audible sibilance that stung Sister St. Saba to a sort of fury. Madness or no, whatever the consequences, she must be alone, all, all alone. She must think, must face this horror which loomed ever nearer, larger, must judge it, not as nun, but as the world would judge. Judged, she must decide, not what she ought to do, for that she knew already, but what she would have strength to do. Even to nuns, she told herself with a dreary little smile, strength comes but by degrees. If present strength matches the present need, all will be well. But if not? Meanwhile, she must judge both strength and need, must strike some sort of balance between them. And, for that, utter solitude!

Never had the huge convent-hospital seemed to her such a human hive as then, while she was wandering to and fro, outwardly calm, but with distraction in her heart, to and fro in search of solitude. At last she found it, a human solitude in truth, but one thick with a ghostly company. Down in the vault of the old church, long since destroyed, close to the crowded little cemetery in the court outside, among the rows of grinning skulls, each with its cross bones neatly laid below, each with its name-card fastened overhead, there, amid the nuns of the past three centuries, Sister St. Saba found her solitude. Above and around her hummed the busy hive of the great convent. Without, the bygone nuns

were sleeping quietly beneath their thick white cover-lids of fleecy snow. Beside her, all that remained of all those other nuns stared at her with their eyeless sockets, measuring her agony by what they too had suffered, pitying silently her woe. Furtively, softly Sister St. Saba closed the heavy door behind her, furtively she peered about her in the dim light to make sure she was alone. Then slowly her gaze swept over the unresponsive circle of her sisterhood that surrounded her, hemming her in on every hand, judging her by those sightless eyes which had stared out on many a generation of just such as she. Just such as she? But were there many such? And what was she after? Guilty? Injured? Innocent? Guilty against, or sinner?

With the tread of an animal fleeing from its foe, she fell to pacing the floor of the vault, to and fro, to and fro, nine steps this way, nine steps back again. Once, yielding to her years-long instinct, she tried to settle her disordered veil, to put back a lock of hair escaped from the prim bands of linen which framed her face. That done, she resumed her nervous tread nine steps this way, nine steps back again, to and fro to and fro. And, with the tread, she resumed her interrupted question. What was she after? Guilty against, or sinner? Was she innocent? A precious living lie? A blot on the pages of the sisterhood?

Angrily she dismissed the question, and dashed away the great tears that hung in her lashes. What right had such hot tears as those to come up the lashes of a nun? Nun's tears should be cool, and pure, and holy. These one had burned her fingers, brushing them aside. But she was no blot upon the pages given to the record of the hospitière nuns.

She was no living lie. She stood there on her merits, loved by them all, respected by them all, prominent among them all, even softly mentioned now and then as the destined successor to the present Mother Superior. She had won the place fairly. She had sought to make a record of her life. She had answered questions of it truthfully, and in all frankness. If there had been any hidden lie behind her record, any concealed sin eating at its foundations, she could never have attained her present eminence in the community.

She had answered every question frankly and with respect to the truth. It was not for her to dictate the questions, in order to make sure they covered everything, every single thing: word and act and thought and — yes, emotion, of her whole past life. Besides, once and for all she had made her detailed confession. Not here, not lately; but long and long before she had ever thought of taking vows. She had made contrite confession, had worked hard and hard to gain her later absolution, had never slipped back again into the old, old sin. By every literal law of her church, by every strict interpretation of its creed, that chapter of her life was at an end, honourably, absolutely. Its sin and its worked-out penance were for ever a buried secret between herself and her old confessor. And the confessor had been a man of another race, old, old. Doubtless he was long since dead, dead as those ranks of sisters who eyed her blankly from the nearer wall. Sister St. Saba was sorry he was dead. It would have been a comfort to confess to him once more, to lay down the whole ugly complication once again before his kindly, shrewd old eyes, eyes which, it seemed to her, had been fixed on heaven only across a long perspective of this world's detail.

It was a good quarter of a century since she had told to him her story. She had been a young girl then; she had thought herself most miserably unhappy. Measured by the agony of to-day, however, that unhappiness had been the merest twinge of discomfort. A quarter of a century! And the time since then had changed the picture vastly. Some of the lines had become quite obliterated beneath the dust of years that lay upon them; some other lines stared at her, as sharp as ever, as sharp and infinitely blacker. Was that the way it always was, with passing years, she wondered. Did those nuns over there, if consciousness remained to them and conscience, find out that every decade was recasting their notions as to what their lives had been? She glanced across at them, in a mute appeal for answer to her question; but they only stared back at her mutely, blank and unsympathetic.

She could barely make them out by now; twilight was falling fast inside the vault. Soon they would be only palely gleaming bits of white amid the surrounding darkness. Then they too would vanish into the dark, and she would be left quite alone. Sister St. Saba wished the twilight would not hurry. She gained a sense of comradeship even from their staring, blank unsympathy. They were all that now remained of what had gone to make the early history of her chosen order, the history in which she had so much delighted. Her ancestors they were, as the soul measures things, spiritual flesh of her spiritual flesh. And, besides, before they had been Hospitalière nuns, they had been women, vital flesh and blood, and subject to temptation. Perchance, even, some one among them might have told over to her long-dead confessor a story such

as her own had been. Or, perchance, it might have been one of the three nuns missing from the grim array, nuns who, in the horrible confusion following on siege and fire, had been laid to rest eternal among their sisters of the Ursulines. In any case, whoever it was, and when, in all that long, long line of cloistered women, there must have been some one among them who had suffered as she was suffering now.

And, after all, what was the story she had told the priest?

Bit by bit, she went over its details. She took them slowly and one by one, seeking to delude herself with the pretence that it needed a little time for her to recall them. Like a child playing a game that begins always "Now let's pretend," she smiled a little at her attempted self-deception. Then she cast it from her in a fury of self-scorn. Time to recall the details of the story! But never once in all those years had she dismissed them. True, she had buried them as deeply as she could beneath the mingled grain and chaff reaped out of many, many passing seasons; but, all that time, she had known only too well that they were lying underneath, ready to come forth at any instant. She might as well have pretended to forget the fact of her existence as to have forgotten these, its vital elements. The scars branded upon one's skin are not obliterated by the dust of powder that hides them from full view.

To and fro. To and fro. Nine steps this way, and nine steps back again. The white gleam of the dead nuns had vanished in the blackness, and, from overhead, the faint tinkle of a distant bell sounded the call to evening prayer. Sister St. Saba never heeded. As happens once or twice in every lifetime, she was too

busy now to stop to pray. She was busy, pushing aside the years-old covering, in bringing out, untorn, the fabric of the old, old story told the priest so long ago. She brought it out; then bent above it, lost in study of its familiar old details.

Like every other old story, it began *Once on a time*; and to her present eyes the time seemed curiously remote, in space as well as in years. There had been a girl, pretty, young, a bit wilful, a bit spoiled, a girl without any family in particular and with a taste for nursing. Study in those days was far more difficult than now; girl students of that day did without a good many things, proper chaperonage among them. They started out to learn everything; and they generally ended by learning a little more. The student epoch ended, the girl went to take a short case, then another longer one, and in a family of great riches and position. The wife thought herself delicate, threatened with all manner of dire complications which, in the end, always failed to develop. And then? Sister St. Saba walked more slowly. There was no use in keeping up this fleeing, nervous pace, now that the unseen foe was holding her tight, within its crushing grip. Then there developed complications of another sort, of quite another sort. A little later on, there came the end, tragic, sudden, explosive in its force.

It had been at once an end and a beginning. Afterwards, a woman, a nurse, but a girl no longer, had quietly reëntered the city of her birth, the city where she had departed, years on years before, full of blithe childish plans for seeing the world and learning what it really was. Her lesson learned, she had come back again, a stranger. In her care, there had come a child,

a tiny boy. The boy was grave beyond all harmony with his years, and he had a trick of looking out at life with an odd expression of baffled wonder in his eyes, eyes the colour of dark amber, long-lashed, dreamy and a little bit short-sighted. Except for his eyes, he was rather an ugly little boy, as far as his face went; but his figure was well-knit and slim and strong, the poise of his yellow head betokened breeding. He was a silent child, sensitive but self-contained, and, from his babyhood, he did his best to cover up his feverish desire for love, for human contact. Even with herself, his constant comrade, he would have died, rather than speak out and babble to her all his child devotion. In truth, even from his babyhood, he had been singularly mature, both in the strength of his affection, and in his constant and insistent effort to conceal it from every human eye. He was a child to rejoice greatly, or to suffer deeply. For such as he, there could be no middle ground.

The girl had been Catholic. By strict agreement, the child, left in her care, was to be kept away from all connection with her faith, was to be reared a Protestant. That had been decided, together with the amount of his annuity, as well as of the salary drawn by the woman, girl no longer, who was chosen to have the care of him.

Heavy at first, by slow degrees the care grew lighter. Certain questions had been settled once for all; certain responsibilities little by little were taken from her, to be divided among those to whom his education, spiritual and academic, was to be entrusted. Accordingly, bit by bit as there grew more leisure, bit by bit his mature companion was able to increase her outside

interests, among them that chief interest of all, her church, her soul's salvation.

Midway in her restless pacing, Sister St. Saba halted and pressed her hands against her aching eyes, her throbbing temples. Then, clasped, she brought them down before her in a wild sweep of agonized despair. What was her soul, anyway? Where was it? Was it worth salvation, granted even that salvation lay along the pathway she had come to choose? Who could tell her? Already she had overpassed the limits of the story she had told her priest confessor in those days of old. She had not yet come to the beginning of the record she had entrusted to the confessor of the sisterhood. What lay between? A forfeited trust? A broken vow? But she had taken other vows since then, had been quite true to them in thought and deed. In her life, as in every other, there were vows and vows. How could she discriminate between them, once they crossed purposes?

It had been three years later on when, after a season of struggles and of prayers, she had yielded to the call of her vocation. Since that time? She drew a slow, deep breath. Since that time, she had done the very best that lay within her to be true to all her vows, her vows to man as well as her vows to God. At the time, it had seemed difficult to reconcile them; bit by bit the way had opened clear before her. Sure first of all of her vocation, a nurse by training, she naturally had sought an order of nursing nuns. Of these, the Hospitalières and of the Hôtel-Dieu had seemed to her the most desirable. Her ancestors had made their record in the history of the past; her income was enough and more to ensure her right to be admitted to the order.

Her character was a mere matter of a little local inquiry. A small detail like leaving her young charge in friendly, prudent hands could easily be overlooked, beside the great fact of her approaching cloisterhood. However, for the child's own sake, it seemed expedient to take the step as quietly as possible. Accordingly, she had put him to bed, one night, exactly in the usual way. Then, kissing him on cheek and brow, she had shut her teeth together and walked away, out of the little room made gay with pretty trifles such as children love, into the white barrenness of her novitiate. For long months after, too, it seemed to her that her life had changed just to match the barren whiteness of her changed surroundings.

Of her changed surroundings!

For a moment, her mind halted upon the details of the day which had marked her death to the world, her birth into the life of holy cloisterhood and toil awaiting her. The change had come to her at the very start, when, immediately after her Superior, she had taken the communion. Then, standing alone in the middle of the choir, she had bowed low towards each of the four walls, token of her lifelong farewell to the four corners of the world outside. A moment later, she had cast herself, face down, upon the pavement, while the four young sisters, treading softly, slowly, came to stretch over her the pall. From this living death, she had arisen into her new life, to find the sisters gathered round her in the choir, and to lead them, singing the *Te Deum*.

"*Pleni sunt coeli,*" she had sung. And, later on, "*Judex crederis esse venturus.*"

Shalt come to be our Judge. Our Judge! She dragged

her mind away from the impressive ceremony, and fixed it once more upon the boy who, even at a distance, even above her vows, had been her lifelong care.

Even from her cloister, she had kept a distant watch over the boy. This seemingly impossible task she had been able to accomplish by way of her confessor, a wise old man who, in his journeyings to and fro about the city, had contrived to work his way into many and many a life, brightening it and blessing. She knew, through his reports, how the child was growing and waxing strong and wise. She knew when he left the kindergarten and went into school, knew when he had measles and when he began to cut his second teeth. She also knew, none better than herself, in fact, how through all his growing boyhood he kept to his old strength of possible affection, his old, old trick of rigid self-control. Without once seeing him after the night when her last kiss had fallen on his chubby cheek, she was quite well aware of all his lonely self-repression, all the suffering her act had brought him, all it was yet to bring. She justified it to herself, as she had justified the gaps in her confession, by the good they both were gaining from her life of prayers and holy toil.

When the boy was just ready to start out into college and into consequent manhood, Sister St. Saba had sent for him, one day. Watching him steadily, albeit from a distance, she had decided that the time had come to trust him with her secret. She owed as much as that to him, and to the claims of her own conscience. They had been long together, when Bernon Tremaine came out across the corridor, a boy no longer, but a full-grown man, his face still and white, the light for ever a little dimmed in his clear, amber eyes. His

friends, seeing the difference at a glance, attributed it to the dread of his departure, next day. By the time he had come home for his first vacation, the change had become a fact too settled to admit of comment. Some men were made that way, they said to one another; and Bernon Tremaine was of them. That was all. That any specific incident or hour had worked the change, they had no possible idea.

From that time onward, Sister St. Saba saw Tremaine, a few times every year. They talked together without reservation; yet it had been the distinct, emphatic request of the nun that Tremaine should speak to no one else of the relationship which lay between them. This was not for her sake, nor for his; but merely in loyalty to certain promises which she had made, long years before. Her own secret she had placed in his hands, without any reservations. The secrets of others, however closely allied with hers, she kept implicitly. This also was according to her promises.

These promises had been made so long ago that, at the time, the fact itself had seemed the one consideration. Consequences, potential at most, were far too remote to be taken into account. Up to the very letter, though not, perhaps, the very spirit, she had kept her promises. And now? They were crushed to dust, and the dust cast out upon the whirlwind of the consequences, remote no longer, but staring her in the face.

She had reassembled all the facts. It now remained for her to enumerate all the consequences. She set about it bravely; but, at the first, worst one of all, she faltered. That alone and at whatever cost must be forestalled, prevented. What matter that her vows

forbade? It was a time when the highest law of all imaginable laws must dictate the deliberate breaking of any vow. It mattered nothing that, breaking it, she might also break in two the life of Bernon Tremaine. She faced that possibility with inflexible courage, although the very thought of it seemed to stab her to her heart. And did it matter nothing, also, that, breaking it, she might break down the foundations of her place in the community? As that question flashed across her brain, Sister St. Saba stopped short, while her fingers left the silver cross, to tear at the linen guimpe about her throat, which suddenly seemed smothering her, choking her. Her place in the community! Her place! There must be some way out of that. Else, what good in a life like hers, useful, obedient to every holy vow?

To and fro, to and fro. Nine steps this way. Nine steps back again. Sister St. Saba's head was bowed upon her chest; Sister St. Saba's hands, one on the other, were clasped about her silver cross. Around her upon every side, through the enveloping darkness, the sightless eyes of bygone nuns seemed bent upon her, mutely beseeching her to leave their age-long record still unsmirched. The only question was, what would smirch it most. That was the one question. That -- and her place among them.

To and fro. Nine steps this way, and -- At the fourth step, Sister St. Saba paused and raised her head. Out of the darkness, a way had dawned upon her.

But Sister St. Saba, long within the burial vault, omitted her evening prayers, that night. Instead, leaving her penances until the morrow, she flung herself upon her bed and slept the deep sleep of exhaustion.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

TOWARDS noon, next day, Donald Rhodes came strolling into Tremaine's office, his fists in his pockets, his cap cocked on the back of his head. Hilarity was on his tongue; but a wistful gravity was in his dark blue eyes.

"Positively my last appearance," he remarked from the threshold. Then, catching sight of Fordyce sitting within, he added, "I say, am I intruding? This looks like some sort of a secret session."

Tremaine glanced up alertly.

"Rhodes! Come in, man. We never have any secrets going on here," he assured his guest.

Don came over the threshold, took a seat.

"Nor anything else to speak of, from the looks of it," he observed, as he crossed his legs, then tossed aside his cap. "As I say, this is my last appearance here. To-morrow will be full of things, and I suppose we go down, Monday."

"Unless you change your mind again," Fordyce made unkind suggestion.

Don laughed.

"We can't. Leastwise, if we do, we'll have to spend the night in the baggage car among the trunks. We've booked and unbooked so often, this last week, that, last time I stopped at the office, the clerk was very drastic. Anyhow, we're going, Monday."

"To our sorrow," Fordyce told him.

"Thanks. Ours, too. I made a conundrum about it, last night, that may come in handy for some use," Don assured him. "Want to hear it? You might like to use it, too, Tremaine."

"Why I, in particular?" Tremaine inquired, as he slid down in his chair, crossed his heels on his desk and lighted a cigarette.

"Because it fits you to a T." Don smiled across at him in good-tempered mockery.

"What's the conundrum?" As he spoke, Fordyce copied the position of Tremaine.

"Why is the winter like our hearts?" Don queried. "Give it up? Because they both are breaking. Good; is n't it?"

"Ripping," Fordyce made languid assent. "Have you tried it yet on Ethel?"

To his extreme surprise, a glint of anger flashed into the blue eyes of Don, and his response came a little haughtily.

"If you don't mind, Fordyce, I'd rather not be joking about Miss Cameron."

The heels of Fordyce went crashing to the floor.

"Good Lord, man!" he blurted out. "You don't mean it's come to that, already?"

"Come to what?" Don parried.

"Come to — Why, come to — to where the girl is n't a fit subject for joking."

"She never has been, as far as I have been concerned," Don answered, still a little stiffly.

"Good — Lord!" Fordyce reiterated slowly. "Is that the state of the case? No wonder they say you Americans are rapid people, Rhodes."

"Not so rapid. There has been plenty of time —"

"Time! Four or five weeks! To my sure knowledge, you did n't meet her at all, till this winter. And it takes us Canadians as many years as you have had weeks. Tremaine, will you listen to this man!" Fordyce adjured him.

But Tremaine was the last man to be called upon to condemn Don. He smiled to himself, as he listened to Fordyce's appeal for support. Had not he, too, known what it was to have his world, his universe, entirely reconstructed in the same space of time? But Don was once more speaking, and, this time, his young voice was very earnest.

"Now see here, you fellows," he was saying; "of course, I had no business to be telling you this. It's only my position, anyway. So far as I know, Miss Cameron has no idea how I — how I feel about things. So far as I know, she likes Tremaine, and Gerrans, and all the rest of you just as well as she likes me."

"Hm! Well, very likely," Fordyce told him. "When is it your intention to find out?"

"When she has had time to know just what I am good for," Don answered steadily.

There came a short pause. Then Fordyce spoke, and gravely.

"Then, Rhodes, you may as well go in for it at once," he said. "I have known Ethel Cameron since she was a youngster. Her father was my mother's cousin, in fact; and I always counted her as kin, counted myself as her big brother. If you're really, honestly in earnest — and I never once imagined that you were — then go ahead and have it out with her as soon as possible."

"Not before I go away; that is, go away this time?"

"Yes. It's the fairest thing to do," Fordyce said, with a seriousness that transfigured his lean, lined, ugly face into a new dignity. "If the girl really happens to care for you, it's hard on her to go away to leave her wondering whether there's anything in it all, or not. Such wonderings are bound to come, once a girl is left alone; and they are bound to take the edge off the delicacy of things a little. Best have it out and done with, and not have the uncertainty dangling along above you both. Don't you think that's true, Tremaine?"

Appealed to in this summary fashion, Tremaine detached himself from his reverie with a difficulty which was manifest to them both. Nevertheless, his answer, when it came, was in no sense equivocal.

"I never believe much in dangles," he said tersely. "What's more, if things are going to happen at all, they're just as likely to happen in four weeks, or even in four days, as in four years."

"Perhaps. Still, I have a legal mind, and I take things rather more deliberately than that," Fordyce responded. "I always know what girls I like; but I'm never sure just how much I like them. As a result, while I am making up my mind, some other chap gets quite sure, and walks off with the girl from beneath my very nose. Second result: a lean and disgruntled bachelor."

"I did n't know you cared for girls," Tremaine observed, as he scratched another match.

"Mutual, my dear young friend," Fordyce retorted. "There's this difference, though: they all do care for you. I suppose they would care for me, too, if I kept them in their proper places, as you do; but I never have the heart to snub them. Fact is, I care for them lots:

not for lots of them, though, the way Gerry Gerrans does. He is another one they all adore," Fordyce added meditatively.

"Because he keeps them in their proper places?" Tremaine inquired, with caustic emphasis.

"It depends on what you call the proper place, Tremaine. At least, he does n't follow very closely on your methods. Speaking of girls, though," deliberately Fordyce lighted a fresh cigarette, then took careful aim at the waste basket with his burnt-out match; "it's a blue moon, Rhodes, since I've seen a girl I admire as I do your cousin."

Don liked his tone, as far removed from sentiment as it was from all frivolity. His answer came, upon the instant.

"Fordyce, she's one of millions. I only wish —"

But his wish was never spoken. Instead, he jumped to catch the ink, shaken from its place by the accidental tipping of Tremaine's foot.

"Next time you feel like kicking over the inkstand, old man, please send out warning signals in advance," he admonished Tremaine cheerily, as he sank down again into his chair. Then he turned back to Fordyce. "Speaking of Hilda, Fordyce, I wish I knew what had come over her."

"How do you mean?"

"She is n't a bit like herself, these days. She's fidgety, seems all the time as if she were waiting for something to happen, something that never quite comes off. One minute, she talks you to death; next minute, she's away off, a thousand miles from you, and does n't hear a word you are saying."

Tremaine's eyes, fixed on the glowing spark before

him, lighted into comprehension. He knew what had come over Hilda, for was not the selfsame thing fast coming over himself? In fact, it had already come. He held his peace, however. There was no need for him to answer a remark addressed to Fordyce. Besides, Don was once more speaking; this time, though, a good deal more lightly.

"Still, what's the use of trying to analyze a girl?" he added sagely. "To us mere men, they're bound to be a good deal of a puzzle, anyhow; and I suspect we'd find out that, if they were n't, they'd have lost half their charm. As for Hilda, you don't begin to know her. All my life, she's been sister and chum and sweetheart, rolled into one."

"Rather an impossible sort of combination, I should say," Tremaine observed grimly, as he uncoiled his legs from their comfortable knot, and went to answer an insistent call from the telephone across the room.

However, before he could take down the receiver, Don's reply had come.

"Not at all. Try it, yourself, some day, and you'll find it not only possible, but a mighty good thing."

But already Fordyce was pondering the possibilities of the combination. According to his ineradicable habit, he delivered his verdict straight at the inner edge of his left thumb nail.

"Depends somewhat upon the girl," he said tersely. Then he fell silent, not to interfere with the voice coming in over the telephone, a woman's voice and pitched on a key that betokened nerves, he told himself, with a lawyer's instinctive grasp of relevant details. Then he took himself to task for seeming to spy upon the interests of his friend.

"Again so soon? Really, that's very good of you," Tremaine was saying; and Fordyce, listening perforce, was struck by the charm of the courteous intonation of each clean-cut, simple syllable. "You know I always enjoy it. I wish I could come, this afternoon; but I have an engagement. Yes, it is an important one; it is with a friend who is going out of town almost at once. Yes. Yes. No. You say it is necessary? Oh; then I will see. Yes. No. No. Hold the wire for a moment, please." His hand over the transmitter, he turned to Don. "Rhodes," he asked, and, asking, his face was a little troubled; "do you suppose your sister would let me off from that drive, this afternoon? I know it sounds a beastly rude thing to ask; but I'm needed here in town on a matter of business."

Don nodded in careless acquiescence.

"That's the best thing about Hilda," he said briefly. "She always understands about a thing like that, and takes it like a sensible being. She won't care about it in the least."

But Tremaine, facing back to the telephone once more, was conscious of a happy certainty that Hilda would care, would care exceedingly.

The interrupted conversation, all three men felt, had been upon too intimate a theme to be renewed after so definite a break. Accordingly, a pause came over the group, when Tremaine, his face somewhat disturbed, was once more settled with his heels upon his desk. Don broke the pause, with a recurrence to his original mood of chaff.

"To go back to my reason for appearing here, Tremaine," he said, with a painstaking effort after lightness; "as I told you, it's my last chance to come down

here. If you don't mind, I'd rather like to look around the place a bit, to see what traces I can find that your work has advanced one single iota, since I came. I'm not your chief; it can't do you any harm, and the time may come when I shall like to quote your example to certain of the powers at home. To crib one of Fordyce's trenchant observations, we Americans are such a strenuous race, you know. When we do get busy, we kick up such a dust that all the rest of the world has to stand around and rub its eyes." And, his hands in his pockets, he rose, strolled aimlessly about the room and then, still aimlessly, he nodded his farewells, strolled out of the room and down the stairs.

Silence followed his going. The two men left behind smoked on in the wordless communion that men know. When Fordyce did speak, it was without lifting his eyes to the face of his companion.

"Tremaine, old chap, something is going wrong."

"Yes. Perhaps."

"Sorry. Can I help?"

"No. And I'm not sure it's going, either, nor really what it is."

"When I can help, I'm here."

"Thanks."

The silence came again, and lasted.

"Tremaine," Fordyce said, when at length he rose to go; "it's a great thing to have had one's knickerbocker days in common; it ensures a point for taking hold again, when the time comes. I don't want to butt in; it's only my confounded legal taint that makes me notice things. But, if the time ever does come for me to take hold, I'm here, and ready." And, without another word, he went his way.

It is instinct, after all, not reason, that warns of coming danger. Tremaine's heart was throbbing heavily, that afternoon, as he mounted the long flight of granite steps leading to the door of the Hôtel-Dieu. His mind assured him that he had no reason for dreading his coming talk with Sister St. Saba. None the less, his whole being was weighed down by a dull foreboding which he could neither analyze nor hold in check. Sister St. Saba's voice, that morning, had been in part responsible for this leaden fear; another cause had lain, latent and disregarded, in his mind, ever since his interview with her, two days before. Voluntarily he had thrust it from his consideration: but it had been waiting, lurking in the depths of his memory, ready to spring up again, once the time should come. And now the time had come.

Sister St. Saba had named the hour for his call. The clock was striking, as he came inside the vestibule, and the porter, capped and smiling, was evidently waiting, ready to admit him. He nodded to the porter, nodded again to the head surgeon, just on his way towards the operating-room, sent his name to Sister St. Saba, and then made his own way into the convent parlour, with an uncomfortable consciousness that he too was facing an operation on his own account.

It caused him no especial surprise that Sister St. Saba was there before him, already seated on her own side of the little wicket; no surprise when, at the sound of his step in the room, the wicket flew open to disclose her face. Her face, however, did cause him a distinct shock, so haggard was it, so drawn, so grayish white within its framing bands of linen. As she greeted him, her smile was steady; but her pale brown eyes were

wide and staring, the eyes of one who has recently looked horror in the face, has met its glare and faltered, not the conqueror, but the conquered.

Before the change, Tremaine forgot his vague forebodings in a new, sharp terror. He started forward, his hand outstretched to hers.

"Mother!" he exclaimed. "What is it? Are you ill? In trouble?"

She waved him back to the chair, placed ready for him just outside the wicket.

As if dazed by the new fear which had fallen on him, he obeyed her gesture and sat down.

"But what is it?" he urged. "Tell me about it. It is my right to know. Are you ill? You must be, or you would n't —" His voice trailed off into silence, as he met the fear within her eyes.

"No," she answered him, and her voice was hoarse, lifeless, dull. "I am not ill, Bernon; only — worried."

"Tell me," he bade her as gently as he could, for he was quick to feel that she was not far from the tears which, man like, he dreaded. "Let me share the worry, mother. That is the reason I am here, the reason I have always stayed so near you, so that, when the time came, I might be of some use."

She gazed back at him in dull surprise and question.

"When the time came? Did you expect it, Bernon?"

"All my life, I have been braced to meet it," he said briefly.

"But why did you — Why should you expect it?"

"How could I help it? It was bound to come. One puts off some things, but never really prevents them,"

he told her steadily. "And it has come now. What is the worry, mother; what about?"

Again she sat silent, staring at him dully.

"About — you," she said at length.

"About me?"

"Yes, you." Then Sister St. Saba's head fell forward on her hands. "Oh, my poor, poor boy!" she wailed. An instant later, she had bowed herself together limply, shaken from head to foot with harsh, dry sobs.

It is not easy to regain control, once the curb, tight held for years, snaps and is flung aside. It was long before Sister St. Saba spoke again, long that Tremaine sat watching her in silent, futile sympathy, while the old vague foreboding came back upon him and increased a thousand fold. At last, Sister St. Saba made a violent effort, crushed back her sobs, lifted her agonized face to his and spoke. And, while she spoke, the agony spread to the face of Tremaine, listening; covered it and rested, frozen, there.

With a quiet precision which betrayed long hours of careful thought, Sister St. Saba told her story. With broad, incisive strokes, she showed him all the crude, harsh details; then she showed him all the cruel consequences down to the remotest end. Her voice broke now and then over her own bald words; her eyes drooped over the hideous facts, the yet more hideous consequences; but her courage held out to the very end. And, when it came, the end died into a silence which left them sitting motionless, face to face, white and still. The moments lengthened, multiplied. Sister St. Saba fell back in her chair, drawing a long, slow breath. With an instinctive gesture, her hand rose to

her silver cross, curved as if to shut about it; then it fell again and rested on her white serge lap, half open, while a new light of horror leaped up into her eyes.

Tremaine, however, never stirred. His head sunk forward on his chest, his face devoid of all expression, save for the mask of agony which had fallen on it at her words, his eyes veiled and hidden from her view behind his lowering brows, he sat there, as if frozen in his place. His shoulders had shrunk together, and his hands lay loosely on his knee. As yet, there was no tensivity in face or pose. That would come later; and, coming, it would endure. It takes a little time for a man to stiffen, even beneath a mortal blow; and this blow, Sister St. Saba had realized, even while she dealt it, had been mortal.

At last he aroused from his daze, lifted his eyes and shivered, as with a physical chill. Then swiftly he recalled his shattered manhood, rallied it to meet the sudden need. His teeth shut hard; his fingers clinched each other until the skin gave way beneath the pointed nails. A moment afterward, he spoke, and his voice surprised himself by its firmness.

"I wish you had told me sooner, mother," he said slowly.

"You never knew?"

"How could I?"

"I don't know. Sometimes one suspects things."

"There seemed no reason for suspicion," he answered sadly. "I trusted you, just as I trusted life itself."

Again, as if the words had stabbed her, her fingers sought the cross upon her breast. Again they faltered, fell away.

"But I have told you now," she said.

"Yes, now. But it is too late." Then he strengthened the pressure he had been placing on himself. "Forgive me, mother," he added gently. "I have no right to speak to you like that. And it has been hardest of all for you."

"Yes," she echoed dully, for, now that the crisis was passing, she began to distrust her own strength. "It has been hardest of all for me."

Tremaine rose to his feet. The mask of agony still lay upon his features, a stiff mask, but not distorted. From underneath it, his eyes peered out uncertainly as if their sight had become a thing to question. His head, however, was erect, his carriage firm and full of the dignity which comes from accepted sorrow. Fallen inertly backward in her chair, Sister St. Saba gazed at him with anguished, terror-stricken eyes.

"Bernon, are you going?"

"Yes."

"Shall you ever come back?"

"I hope so," he answered, with an effort for his old, kindly intonation upon which she had learned to count, as one of the few remaining rights of the motherhood whose outward forms she had so lightly flung away.

She sprang forward to the passless wicket, stung to new life by a sudden, agonizing fear.

"Bernon! Bernon! My boy, where are you going?"

In answer to the wail of hopeless, helpless woe, his own voice broke a little.

"Out into the dark, mother, to be alone a little while, all alone, until I have learned to get used to it."

The echo of his retreating footsteps died away in the

corridor. Within the room behind the open wicket, there came a muffled thud.

An hour later, they came upon Sister St. Saba, unconscious and breathing heavily, huddled together on the floor beside her empty chair.

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CHAPTER TWENTY

STRAIGHT between the eyes had the blow fallen. Tremaine could feel its crushing impact still, although many hours had passed away since he had left the Hôtel-Dieu. Following the instinct of every animal wounded to the death, he had gone to hide himself in his own room. No alien, uncomprehending eyes should look upon his suffering. Once in his room, the key turned upon all intruders, he had flung himself down, still in his fur-lined coat, on the nearest chair and had sat there, inert, motionless. It would have been untold relief, if only he could have raved a little, could have cursed, and raged about the room. Such raving, however, was alien to his nature; and, besides, the hurt was too deep to yield to physical heroics. He merely sat there, his body passive and relaxed, but his brain maddeningly active, flashing this way and that between the past and future, between the blow itself and the festering consequences which were bound to follow.

Motionless, inert he sat there, while the hour for dinner came and went, and then the hour for sleep. It seemed to him that never again would he care for sleep or food, never again for much of anything. Even his pride had left him, the pride which, heretofore, had bade him take his lonely life and make of it

all he could until, in the far-off end, it should not be isolated, but significant to all men. Now he felt no especial desire to have the rest of his life amount to anything in particular. He vaguely realized that there would be a rest of it. As a rule, one did not die, just because one's plans and hopes had all gone bad. He realized that, next day, he would be in the office just as usual, would meet his business engagements, perhaps his social ones. Melodramatic disappearances were out of fashion nowadays; and, as a matter of course, he would yield to fashion. In the morning, he would go back into his life again, would be just the same Tremaine he always had been, only perhaps a little stiller. To-night, however, it was his right, his need, to sit apart and think.

And he did sit apart and think until the unlighted room turned grayish with the coming dawn; turned pearly white and then, as the sun shot up above the Levis hills, turned to pure gold. Thought-time had ended with the night; the next day had come, and with it would inevitably come the old routine. He sighed a little, shut his teeth, then rose, tossed off his wrinkled clothes and, after an interval of splashing, emerged into the dazzling daylight, tubbed and groomed with care, the usual Tremaine, only curiously older, curiously still and wan.

Even now, food was distasteful to him, and, turning disgustedly away from thought of breakfast, he crossed the Ring and came out upon the terrace. It was a biting morning, cold and sharp and still, one of the mornings when winter, as if loath to yield to spring, tightens her grip upon the world. In that tardy little city, few people were as yet abroad, and the terrace was

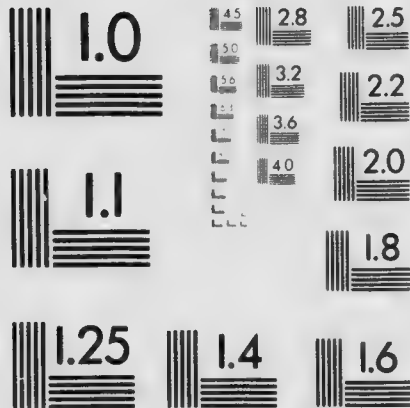
deserted. Tremaine stood there long, his arms crossed on the rail, his eyes upon the flowing, silvery stream beneath, a stream half veiled from sight by the clouds of swirling vapour which rose above it, rose from the sunless water-level to vanish in the upper air above, the barber of the wintry, ice-cold river which seemed boiling beneath the rising, pale gray steam. It rose, and rose, and vanished; and it left no trace behind. That was what his hopes had done, his hopes and all, all of his plans. His heavy eyes were aching with the strain of following the rising steam, in the vague hope of finding somewhere one thin banner which had survived the golden light of day. There was none anywhere, not one.

Above him loomed the Château, its upper roofs gleaming against the dark blue sky, its windows flashing back a greeting to the new, bright day. One of the windows, he knew — His short-sighted, tired eyes drooped more heavily; the lines around his lips hardened. Perhaps, some day when he was old and all his faculties and perceptions were a little numbed he could accept a compromise. Now, the very idea of any compromise was loathly to him. It must be all, or nothing. All, or nothing. It could not be all. Then — nothing. He turned from the rail above the rising, evanescent mist, turned and walked away towards his office, rapidly, but stiffly as if all of one unjointed piece. His hour for relaxation had gone by. Realizing it, he wondered grimly if it would ever come again. If not, so much the better. He went into his office, hung up his hat and coat, and fell to work on the neglected map which, only the day before, had aroused Don's derision.



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"I say," Don observed to his cousin above the grape fruit, next morning; "funny thing; but I saw Tremaine on the terrace just now. As a rule, he's not such an early bird. I hammered on the window at him; but I could n't make him hear."

Hilda sugared her own fruit, then passed the sugar across to Don.

"What do you suppose he was doing there, at such an hour?" she queried.

Don paused, the spoon uplifted, while he shot a glance across at his cousin.

"Serenading, most likely, and got belated," he said nonchalantly then. "Was it a pretty tune?"

Hilda delivered counter thrust.

"How should I know? I slept too hard to hear a whole brass band, after the way I had to sit up, waiting for you to come back from Ethel's. Did you have such a good time, Don?"

Forgetful of his fruit, Don banged his elbows on the table and clasped his hands around the crystal bowl of sugar.

"Hang it all, I wish I knew!" he said, with what, for jovial Don, amounted to the extreme of disconsolateness.

"So do I," Hilda echoed. Then, at sight of Don's face, she grew grave. "I don't want to ask the wrong question, Don; but was n't Ethel — nice to you?"

"Nice, yes, as far as that goes!" Don growled. "But all you girls think it's nice and maidenly to be so blasted inconclusive. Hilda," heedless of the approaching waiter, he faced her steadily; "if ever a man tries — well — tries to tell you things, in all mercy hear him out, and then give him a square an-

swer. Ten to one, he's in earnest; and, when we really do get in earnest, we don't take kindly to shilly-shally."

There was a little pause, so full of meaning that even the waiter felt its import, withdrew discreetly to the corner of the fireplace and fell to making wholly needless toast. Then Hilda raised her pale brown eyes to Don's blue ones.

"If the time ever does come, Don dear," she answered gently; "I will remember what you say." And then she added, with an inconsequent little sigh, "Oh, Don, I wish I felt more ready to go home."

"It will be my last day, you know," Hilda had said to Gerrans, the week before. "Sunday never really counts, you know, and we are going, Monday afternoon. Saturday will be our final fling, then. Can't we plan it out so that we shall fling fast and far? I want to remember the day always and always."

Gerrans had given a jovial assent, and straightway had gone to work with her to make plans. Later on, he had taken council with Allison Carhart and Bernon Tremaine. Hilda's will was law for them all, just then; and Hilda wished her last fling to be a wholly joyous one.

In a sense, it would be a last fling for them all. Winter was breaking fast over the little city. The cold was intermittent, nowadays. Occasionally, a long day's rain came to bite into the high-piled snow; on other days, the sun at noon blazed warmly, and the wisp of smoke from the kiosk at the cabstand by the Ring went floating upward towards a sky whose colour held within it the promise of the coming spring. None the less, save for the midday hour of warmth, within the streetcars

the brake still wore its woollen mitten on its thumb-like, upturned handle; the snow still creaked beneath the runners of the sleighs; the horses still were whiskered bushily with white hoarfrost; and, every now and then, the heavens blazed with the aurora's red and white and rose and vivid violet banners flung up across the evening sky.

And yet, the winter was breaking fast. Already there were days when the streets at noon were wet above their ice coats; when the snow clung soft around one's snowshoes; when only by the most anxious care could the slides be kept from wearing into holes through which peeped the yellow boarding. The time was at hand when the gray little city must come out of her happy retirement, her intimate merrymaking, and take her place once more among her sisters.

For them all, then, that Saturday revel was to be somewhat of the nature of a farewell, not only to Hilda and Don, but to the spirit of the passing winter. By tacit consent, their plan was to limit itself strictly to their old octette: the two Americans, Fordyce, Tremaine and Gerrans, Allison and Ethel and the Aunt who still held her place among them by reason of Allison's decision.

"She's good, Gerry; and, if she did n't take herself so much in earnest, she'd be clever," Allison had argued. "Besides, it's not quite decent to pick her up, and then drop her, because you happen to have found another toy you like a little better."

Gerrans had smiled with unruffled good humour.

"It's not the toys that count, Allie," he had answered. "We play with them a while, and then we drop them. There comes a time, you know, when we outgrow our

toys, and take to — However, keep your toy, if you want her," he had added inconsequently.

And so the Aunt had stayed on within the little circle.

Gerrans and Tremaine, with Allison, had planned the day. Late in the morning, they would drive, two sleigh-loads of them, down to the Falls. Thence, after luncheon, they would take the train down the river and, that afternoon, climb on their snowshoes up the rounded dome of Cap Tourmente. Then back by train again to Kent House to dine and rest a little, and spend the evening on the slides. It would all be possible and perfect, granted the weather held. And now the day had come, a day that was biting cold and still and clear, as if it had been made on purpose.

Nevertheless, at the very start, the plan seemed fated to be ruined. Even the optimism of Gerrans quailed before the prospect; and Allison, unable to keep to herself her dire forebodings, confided the worst ones of them to the Aunt. For the first time in their experience of him, Donald Rhodes was manifestly out of sorts, and Ethel, when she appeared, was quietly determined to go in the same sleigh with Hilda, thus leaving Don to the tender mercies of Fordyce and the Aunt, with Allison a disconcerted fourth. Just as the rearrangement had been made, just as Hilda's infectious gayety had triumphed over the general gloom, there came tidings of another disappointment. Tremaine had just telephoned to Gervase Gerrans that a sudden, urgent need would hold him in the office, all that morning. Later, at noon, he would do his best to join them on the train.

"And it is n't fact at all, you know; nothing but

grouch and hanky-panky," Gerrans, once his report was made, was confiding into Allison's ear. "His story was specious enough; but his voice gave it all away. Confound the chap! What's gone into him to spoil Miss Lynde's last day?"

Allison looked anxious.

"Poor old Bernon! Something must have gone very wrong to upset him for this. And I thought he was getting over his bad times. Did you urge him, Gerry?"

"Urge! In such a state of mind as he was in! I thought you valued my life, Allie."

"So I do," she told him, with a smile; "and never more than now. What's got into everybody, Gerry; everybody but just you? But Hilda's day must n't be spoiled like this. You must help me make it go."

And go it did, down to the last gay word of chaff flung back and forth between the sleighs, during the long drive to the Falls, down to the climax of the last story Gerrans told above the luncheon. By that time, both Allison and Gerrans felt that their worst fears were allayed. There had been neither breaks nor pauses, Ethel was relaxing somewhat of her earlier austerity, and Tremaine would be down on the train, due now in ten minutes. They gathered up their snowshoes with an air of manifest relief.

Even to the optimistic eye of Gervase Gerrans, it was evident, when the train came in, that Tremaine was victim of no ordinary grouch. His face was wan and haggard; his eyes wore the affrighted look of one who has gazed on death; but his manner, so far from being marked with the still, chill reserve they all had learned to regard as characteristic of his blacker moods, was gentle and curiously demonstrative. A child, just

come in, frightened, from the dark outside, could have shown no greater wish for contact with his kind.

Fordyce, watching keenly, sure that he held a partial clue to the change in Tremaine, yet held his peace. Allison, however, waited for her chance to speak. She found it, once they had left the train, and were busy tying on their snowshoes.

"Bernon, what is it?" she asked, too low for any one else to hear.

He strove to put her off.

"What is what?" he asked carelessly; but his eyes drooped before the directness of her gaze.

"No use denying," she said briefly. "You are in some trouble, Bernon. I have n't watched you, all these years, for nothing. Is it bad?"

"Yes, Allie," he confessed steadily. "It's bad."

Her face lighted at this, his first use of her childish name. Then it grew grave again.

"Can't I be of any use?" she asked him pitifully.

He shook his head.

"Only by not noticing it, or me," he told her. "Not now, that is. Some day, perhaps, I can tell you all about it. To-day — To-day, I want to hold myself quite steady. It is the last day that we all shall be together in just the same old way."

Suspiciously she turned her glance towards Hilda, laughing down at Gerrans who had knelt to tie on her shoes. Tremaine intercepted the glance, interpreted it and shook his head.

"No, Allison," he said a little sternly; "we must not spoil the day for her. She has been counting on it, and, for all our sakes, best make the day the brightest that we can." And, quite in his accustomed fashion,

he went forward and placed himself at Hilda's side.

Half way up the long, steep climb, Hilda paused to rest. As she did so, she looked Tremaine squarely in the eyes.

"Mr. Tremaine," she said abruptly, even as Allison had done before; "something is the matter."

This time, he denied the charge.

"Nothing, Miss Lynde, save the infirmity of being slightly out of breath," he assured her lightly. "What should make you think so?"

"Everything. I don't think. . . . ugh; I know. Something is very wrong with you to-day. What is it?"

Again he sought to put her off.

"Am I such bad company?" he asked her.

She shook her head.

"It is n't like you to fish for compliments," she told him gravely. "It is just another sign that you are keeping something from me. I wish you'd tell me. Mr. Tremaine, and let me help it out." Both voice and eyes were very sweet, just then.

His face only stiffened at her words. His voice, though, was not under quite such good control, as he made reply, —

"Nothing serious at all, Miss Lynde. I only am feeling a little out of condition to-day. I did n't sleep, last night, and it makes me dull. I am sorry and ashamed, though, that you should have noticed it."

For a minute or two, her eyes remained upon his face, half accepting his excuse, half doubting. Then she shook her head once more.

"I am sorry," she said slowly; "more sorry than I can say. I wanted the day to stand out for us all, a

perfect memory. And you — you ought never to have tried to come."

She dropped the subject there and then, nor did she, woman fashion, go back to it, later on. But, all that day and all that evening, Tremaine was conscious of her care of him, her thought for him, her ceaseless effort to save him from fatigue and annoyance, her subtle championship in all the interchange of chaff. As gay as ever with the others and as irresponsible, with him she showed a new gentleness, a new consideration which seemed to him the sweetest by far of all her varying moods. She made no wayward pretext of withdrawing herself from his society. They sat together in the train, sat together, later, at the Kent House dinner. Fordyce, from behind his owlsh spectacles, took silent note of the fact, however, that, contrary to their usual custom, it was Tremaine who did the talking. He was witty, gay; he seemed to have taken on himself all of Hilda's irresponsibility. The little lawyer, watching, took off his spectacles.

"*Morituri, salutamus*," he whispered to himself, the while he wiped them. "Whatever is the trouble, he'll go under, colours flying."

"I beg your pardon?" said the Aunt, who sat beside him.

By the tacit consent of all around them, Hilda and Tremaine had been left to pair off thus together. Gerrens and Allison had loitered a little apart, discussing low the change which, without warning, had come upon their friend. Don and Ethel had also strayed apart, for Ethel was doing her level best to make Don forget all about her shilly-shally of the night before. As for Fordyce, adoring Hilda absolutely, dreading her ap-

proaching departure far more than any of the others but Tremaine, he yet was willing to step aside out of the running, and leave these last hours for the man who, it was plain to all, was smitten down beneath a load of grievous trouble. Later? Fordyce's loyalty forbade an answer to the question. Instead, he passed the olives to the Aunt. And the Aunt took one, and thanked him, and then regaled him on a carefully-elaborated epigram. Poor soul! It was not her fault that no one had ever told her that wit is never any match for girlish charm.

And so the day and evening wore along, to Don and Ethel beatific, triumphant to the Aunt from whose side Fordyce never once had sought to budge. It had been a season of nerve-racking strain, however, to all the others except Hilda. To her it had been unstrained, and far too short. Conscious of her care over Tremaine, conscious of his reliance on her care, his tacit appreciation of its support at every point, the girl was thrilling with exultation that now at last, for just a little while, their relations had been changed. Heretofore, Tremaine had been self-reliant, even a little masterful. Heretofore, his strength had been so perfect as to leave no loophole for her ministrations. Even his injured wrist had been a trivial matter; he had dismissed it, as a thing of no account, had been manifestly irritated at the efforts of his friends to coddle him. Now, however, he was different. His very gayety showed superficial, and carried its own mute appeal for support and for an equally mute consolation. And Hilda, her wayward irresponsibility all cast aside, gave him of both in fullest measure. Her woman's instinct told her with perfect truthfulness that never in all his strength had

Tremaine and she come together as they were doing now, in this, his hour of prostrate weakness. It told her, too, infallibly, as instinct does sometimes, that rarely again in all the future would such an hour as that come to them. Happy in the hour, then, and with no foreboding of the future, Hilda Lynde quaffed deep, that evening, of the living spring of life.

An allied mood of happiness had lain upon her, the afternoon before. Just at the very hour, it chanced, when Tremaine, dazed, stupefied, was stumbling down the great gray steps of the Hôtel-Dieu, next door, Hilda had risen from her seat before the Carhart fire, and drawn her furs around her. Then, obedient to some impulse for which she never was able to account, she had turned back again to Allison.

"Allison," she said abruptly; "I don't know why it is we all of us tell you things. We do, though. Besides, I am going away so soon. I may come back; but one never really knows. Do you remember what I said, one day, about our human oyster?"

And Allison, standing before her, fair and comely in her girlish strength, smiled back at her in recollection.

"Yes, of course. What then?"

"Nothing, only," a rush of unwonted scarlet stained Hilda's cheeks and brow; "only, Allison, I think perhaps, just now and then, I've seen — the pearl."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

AFTERWARDS, Tremaine came to pride himself upon the way, all that afternoon and evening, he had kept faith, not only with himself, but with another also. In the time of it, however, he was only yielding a blind obedience to the instinct which had told him what was the only decent thing to do. He had believed that he was dismissing Hilda Lynde into the limbo which swallows up all tourists, whatever their protestations of intent to return. He had made her going as happy as lay within him, regardless of the cost to himself; but it had been with feelings of absolute relief that, from his office windows, he had watched the smoke of her departing train. He had gone through Allison's farewell dinner party, the night before, with a stolid courage which had surprised himself. He had left Hilda and Don at the entrance to the Château court, promising to see them off, next day. When the next day came, however, he had telephoned up his farewells and his regrets. Business was taking him out to Port Neuf. He was so sorry. But next July was only five months distant.

Nevertheless, as he hung up the receiver and turned away from the telephone, he told himself that next July was the flimsiest possible point of support. Under some conditions, he would have followed Hilda to the

States, next month, next week; would have had it out with that florid, prosperous, assertive man who called himself her uncle, and then, a little later, would have had it out with Hilda. With what result, he had not had the slightest doubt. This had been his plan, his dream. Like all other dreams, it had come to him with a rush, just before the instant of waking. And now he had waked up. And the dream was gone for ever.

In the days which followed the going away of Don and Hilda, a slight lethargy seemed to have descended on the group of friends whom they had left behind. The wet, soggy weather was in part responsible for this; partly it came as a natural reaction from the flurry of gayety which had been crammed into those last days of theirs together. On the way back from the station, that Monday noon, Ethel Cameron was manifestly low in her mind. Gerrans admitted that his work was in shameful arrears and must have a little bit of his attention, while Alison frankly confessed to being tired. How far her tiredness had its source in her anxiety about Tremaine she saw no reason to confess, even to Gervase Gerrans. Fordyce, meanwhile, the most distressed one of them all, held his peace and said not a single word. It was not for him to make public explanation that Hilda Lynde was the one woman in the world for him, nor yet that he alone of them all possessed a clue to the swift disaster which had overtaken Bernon Tremaine. Besides, it was no especial clue, only a woman's voice, insistent and somewhat strident in its obvious trouble, calling Tremaine to come to her. And Tremaine had gone. Afterwards had been the change.

Little by little, in the weeks that followed, Tremaine fell back into his old habit of going to brood beside the Carhart fire. He never failed to find a welcome waiting for him, cordial, uncritical. Allison, her embroidery in hand, sat with him, sometimes talking, sometimes speechless from one quarter of an hour into the next. Her personality, the very quality of her hospitality, even, made no more demands upon him than as if she had been one of his own household. She was simply there, and ready, whenever he felt a need for her companionship. Moreover, the girl was acute enough to know that, just then, it was the bare companionship which Tremaine craved; that he was too weary, too sick at heart, to care for entertainment, or even for her sympathy. And Allison, young as she was, and endowed with a superb health of mind and body which would for ever have prevented her falling into such a mood, yet had the supreme tact to give him what he craved, and nothing more. If she watched Tremaine narrowly, in those days, he never knew it. Neither did he know the long hours when she lay awake, wondering less about the cause than about what would be the end of it all, the end for Tremaine, and the end, also, for Hilda Lynde. For Allison Carhart's clear eyes had read Hilda's growing secret almost before it dawned upon the girl herself.

Tremaine generally dropped in upon her at tea-time; never on Mondays, though, when the room was likely to be full of other guests. In fact, Tremaine was singularly little in social evidence, those weeks in March and April. He offered business as an excuse, and turned a deaf ear to all the coaxing invitations that rained in upon him. He could do this the more easily,

just now, and with the less comment, because the fall of Lent had put an end to the more formal functions, and the lesser ones which had to do with outdoor sports had yielded to the evil weather that comes with the breaking up of winter. Later, canoes would take the place of toboggans; but, for the present, both were in abeyance. As for the usual run of teas and petty dances, a man of Tremaine's habits was to be forgiven if he absented himself from them for a season now and then. It only ensured him just so much the warmer welcome, once he reappeared on the horizon.

Meanwhile, regardless of this attitude of universal toleration for his eccentricities, Tremaine was turning a deaf ear to social coaxings, and dividing his daylight hours between his office and the Carhart fire. Just for the present, his imperative needs were for silence and for rest. Even more than the hour in the parlour of the Hôtel-Dieu, even more than the night of agony which had come after, those last two days with Hilda had drained his strength. It had been well worth the while. She had gone away, happy, unsuspecting. Now he could sit back with folded hands, and rest, regain his shattered nervous strength, then, bit by bit, rebuild his shattered future.

For the most part, he accepted the situation with a stoic courage. Now and then, however, his anger rose and mounted wellnigh to madness; not a specific anger directed against any individual, but a great, cosmic rage which included all things. The present situation, with all its reservations, all its agonies, was wholly artificial, wholly needless. If only he could have gone straight to Hilda, could have told her the whole truth, entire, frank, pitiless, it would have been infinitely

better for them both. Anything, indeed, would have been better than the present reservation and concealment. But his tongue was tied; his spiritual hands were bound, bound by the promises extorted from him by Sister St. Saba, bound by the course of events which had been shaping themselves for generations and for centuries. The events would have been enough in themselves; but Sister St. Saba had cast herself to their assistance. She had known just when and how to put on the thumb-screw, just how to appeal to his pity, his loyalty, his inherent chivalry, just how to bind him down, held fast by his inevitable response to her appeal. Later on, he could mutiny; but his mutiny would be feeble, futile, muffled and repressed by the bonds which held him, bonds woven by her plump white hands.

Twice, since then, he had gone back to see her. The first time was to plead his own cause, to beg her to annul the promises of silence which had been wrung from him while they both had been white-hot with passion. The second call had been one of sheer pity, sheer loyalty to the old tie which had bound them, each to each. It had been a white and weazen Sister St. Saba who had come to meet him at the parlour wicket, a Sister St. Saba who tottered slightly, as she came creeping forward, bent as beneath the weight of four score years, a Sister St. Saba whose hollow eyes, darkened by the shadows that lay around them, burned feverishly above her sunken cheeks. At the sight, Tremaine's plea had faltered on his tongue. How could a man ask favours of such a wreck as this? Whatever the secret was doing to his own virile strength, it was fast crushing the life out of Sister St. Saba. He talked

to her a little while as lightly as he could, half caressingly, half in play, as to a little sick child; then he took his leave and went out into the strong sunlight of the outer world, his plea unspoken on his tongue, his mind half stifled by the atmosphere of ruin he had left behind. However, a month later, he went back again. Later, too, he went again. And always, an on-looker at the interview would have wondered at it that these two, the stern-faced man, the nun so plainly marked for death, could find so little serious subject for their conversation.

At the very first, Allison had read him some of Hilda's letters, gay, happy little letters, full of girl gossip and girl doings, full, too, of messages to the friends she had left behind. Fordyce came in for some of these messages, and Gervase Gerrans, and now and then himself. Tremaine listened to the letters and made no comment, none even in answer to the messages. Now and then the extreme stillness of his attitude betrayed to Allison how intently he was listening; but that was all. Try as she would, she could never extort a return message; try as she would, she could never lure Tremaine into a discussion of the letters' contents. None the less, she was quite certain that, asked, he could have repeated the letters back to her from one end to the other.

Only once in all the letters was the stillness of his attention broken. While he idled with his second cup of tea, one day, she had picked up Hilda's latest missive and read parts of it to him. It had been long and even more than usually discursive; it had ranged from spring hats and a belated opera to comments on one and another of the good times they all had had to-

gether, during those winter weeks. Longest of all it had dwelt upon the hockey match, and it suddenly had ended with a message.

"Do tell Mr. Tremaine," it ran on; "that I want him to be sure to give my love, my best love, to his sweet nun nurse. Some day, I hope I shall see her again. All in all, I never met another woman who had *mother* written so large all over her, and I love to remember just the way her hands shut over mine."

"A sweet little message," Allison made comment, as she folded up the heavy sheets of paper. "Any woman, nun or not, would —"

But Tremaine's spoon had fallen, clattering, to the floor. As he stooped to pick it up, Allison caught one glimpse of his face. Seeing, she prudently resolved to read Tremaine no more of Hilda's letters.

Tremaine, then, came in at tea-time. This left the evenings free for Gerrans, who likewise was becoming an almost constant guest at the Carharts' home. Unlike Tremaine, however, he was never silent, never depressed. After the strain of her long hours with Bernon Tremaine, Allison was coming fast to look on Gerrans as just so much embodied sunshine, steady and full of cheer. No matter how far he found her sharing in Tremaine's black mood, he always left her brighter, better, more full of good courage for the final righting of all which now seemed so awry. He accomplished this by no means all by laughing at her despondent fears, by no means all by chaff and good cheer. Instead of that, just as a big brother might have done, he talked over her worries with her, heard her discuss them to the end, and then, with a sort of gentle gayety, he set 'o work to rid her of them. Sometimes he went over the past with

her, bit by bit; sometimes he tried to forecast a brightening future. Always, however, he left her stronger for his understanding, his support.

And Gerrans, sitting and talking about Tremaine for long hours at a time, vouchsafed to Allison no explanation of his sudden devotion to the Carhew drawing-room. He vouchsafed none, even, to himself. Allison needed him; that was all there was about it. Now and then she questioned him a little about his freedom from other engagements. He laughed; but he met her questions frankly. He was working now, really working. Had she seen his story, his first-page, two-column story in that night's paper? And, after hunting copy all the morning, and reducing it to ink, that same afternoon, a chap was tired enough to be glad to curl up in a warm corner and gossip with a chum. Yes, if she must know, he had come to a hiatus in the succession of his love affairs. Hilda Lynde never had appreciated him; and, besides, she had gone away. There was n't anybody else in sight just now. And, after all, one grew a little tired of making himself agreeable. That was where old friends came in; one never had to go through ingratiating antics just for them.

Then, according to his masculine notions of extreme comfort, he piled up all the sofa cushions into an untidy bunch, thrust Allison down among them, prodded the smouldering fire to a blaze and, that done, demanded tidings of the way she had spent her time since his last call, the night before.

And so the winter wore away, and the spring came on, a tardy spring, but exquisite in its belated budding. And, with the spring, new life came upon the quiet city, athrob now with excitement for her summer festival.

Meanwhile, in the torrid southern June, both Don and Hilda were making countless plans for their own share in that same festival. Together, the two cousins spent long hours in talking over all the gay details opening out before them. They did this with no intention of secrecy; yet it was not until the day of their starting northward was almost at hand that any echo of their discussions came to the ears of Stuart Rhodes.

"By the way, Don," Hilda asked him, as carelessly as she was able, one morning when they sat at breakfast; "have you ever heard anything from Mr. Tremaine?"

"Not a word." Don shook his head. "He never was garrulous, you know."

"No. Still, he might have written now and then," Hilda said slowly. "Did you ever write to him?"

Don struggled with a crusty bit of toast, downed it, then answered, —

"Just a note, after we'd been at home for a week or so. He never answered it. It did n't really call for any answer; but I rather thought he would. All fall, he wrote me, every now and then."

From his place at the end of the table where the morning sun struck full across his massive head and snow-white, bushy hair, Stuart Rhodes looked up out of the abstraction which, to all seeming, had been holding him deaf to the talk.

"Who is that?" he queried genially, though with a swift glance from Hilda to his son.

"Bernon Tremaine, Dad," Don told him.

At the other end of the table, Mrs. Rhodes, years younger than her husband and worlds less likable, glanced up, with something astonishingly like fear

written on her thin face and in her washed-out, dark blue eyes. Her husband caught the glance.

"Just in time, Sally; you generally are," he assured her, in the same genial tone that he had used in speaking to his son. Then he beckoned to a servant to take his empty cup. "Not quite as much sugar for the second cup, you know," he charged his wife. Then he turned back to Don. "Tremaine?" he said indolently. "Let me see. That is the fellow you used to write so much about? The engineer?"

"Yes. The one I met, last fall," Don assented carelessly, his mind now on Ethel Cameron.

Stuart Rhodes took his second cup of coffee from the servant and fell to stirring it.

"And you have n't heard from him, since you came home. Is that it, Hilda?" His smile was consciously winning.

Hilda pouted, with an equal consciousness. Now and then Stuart Rhodes had the power of wakening in her the instinct of coquetry, her uncle though he was. Strange to say, it was always her aunt's habit to check this coquetry. She checked it now.

"Was there any especial reason he should write to you, Hilda?" she inquired.

Hilda flushed. Then she forced out a little laugh.

"To Don, I mean; not me," she corrected, vexed at her aunt, and still more vexed at her own rising colour.

But Don took the matter far more philosophically.

"What's the use of his writing, when he is going to see us so soon?" he queried.

Stuart Rhodes frowned. Then, with instant care, he dismissed the frown.

"Us?"

"Yes. You know we are going up for July," Don made careless answer. "What is it, mother? Something wrong?"

"Nothing, Don," she said briefly.

Don laughed, and settled back in his chair again.

"All right. Then don't startle a fellow by looking as if you were going to faint away and tumble out on the floor. Are n't you well, this morning, mother?"

It was an interesting commentary on the characters of his two parents that, whereas Stuart Rhodes was always *Dad* to Don, his wife was *mother*. Something of the reason showed itself now in her answer.

"As well as I ever am," she said a little plaintively; and Don, after a consolatory pat upon the back of her meagre hand, turned once more to his father.

"I thought you knew we were planning to go up, Dad," he repeated. "They're going to have high jinks up there, this summer; and Hilda and I promised we'd go up and jink with them."

"I knew that you were going, Don. But Hilda —"

Don cut in promptly.

"Where Hilda goes, I go, and vice versa. Besides, there'd be some tall howling up there, if Hilda did n't show up. Eh, Hilda?"

Blushing and laughing at the unexpected question, the girl, for the moment, was startlingly pretty. No wonder that, for the same moment, the eyes of Stuart Rhodes rested upon her with manifest pride. The next moment, pride had vanished before something far less likable, something that made him quite forget the frown which was drawing together his bushy, snow-white brows. As swiftly as it had come, however, the

sternness vanished; and, when Hilda looked up at his next question, she met the smile she knew so well as characteristic of her uncle, met it with a ready pleasure which rendered her quite deaf to the stertorous sighs with which Mrs. Rhodes was seeing fit to punctuate the conversation.

"Do you really want to go up there again so soon, Hilda?" Stuart Rhodes was asking.

Her very fear lest she should repeat her traitorous blush stained her cheeks a little deeper; but her answer came with disarming frankness.

"Of course I do. Why not?"

There was a little instant of hesitation. Then Stuart Rhodes made his mistake.

"No reason, child, if you really care to go. It was only that I had engaged rooms on the *Cecilie*, for the third of August."

"Really? How lovely! Is it for Norway, this time?" she asked alertly.

He nodded, wondering, the while, what would befall him, in case his morning telephoning disclosed, as was too likely, that the *Cecilie's* list was full.

"You like it?" he asked, and his voice was genial, indulgent.

"Adore it!"

"Better than Quebec?" he persisted rashly.

Hilda's laugh filled the room.

"It's not a case of better, Uncle Stuart," she said gayly, for she was quick to see that she had bettered him in some pet plan he had for circumventing her. "We sail, the third? Then I can do both things, for Don and I were planning, in any case, to start for home, the first." Then she turned back to her cousin. "Come,

Don," she said; "let's see who gets the post-bag, this morning!" And, with a nod to Mrs. Rhodes, the two cousins went rushing from the room.

Left alone, Stuart Rhodes nodded a dismissal to the servants, then turned to speak to his wife. For a long half-hour, the murmur of their voices rose and fell, his sometimes explanatory, sometimes urgent, hers always querulous. At length, however, he pushed back his chair and rose.

"I am sorry, Sally," he said, with the curious gentleness of a goaded animal just before it turns to bay. "I wish it need never have been. It was, though. In the time of it, you agreed. Now all we either of us can do is to stick to the very letter of the agreement." Then he turned away and left the room, left her, too, sitting motionless, her thin face, now a little mottled, resting within her meagre hands.

A cigar in his fingers and a soft cap on his bushy hair, Stuart Rhodes stepped out upon the terrace of his summer home, halted and looked about him. Then he walked on again, and vanished in a great thicket of blazing rhododendrons. At the far side of the thicket, he came on Hilda, buried in a letter. He sat down beside her, and flung his arm along the back of the rustic seat.

"Well, child, so the mail was good to you?" he queried.

"Yes. See what a long, long letter!" She held it up before him, and, in the black and dashing characters, he could make out the name of Bernon Tremaine, and repeated more than once. "It's from Allison Carhart," she added then.

Stuart Rhodes slid his arm from the seat-back to her shoulder.

"You like these Canadian friends of yours?" he asked her.

Her answer came at once, and frankly.

"Dearly, and so many of them. They were so good to us, did so much to make our stay a pleasant one." She smiled at the recollection. Then her smile widened. "Were n't you astonished, Uncle Stuart, when you found we'd gone?"

His answer came with perfect truthfulness.

"I should say I was."

Hilda chattered on.

"I thought you would be. It all came up in the very edge of a minute, you know, just one of Don's whims. Aunt Sally was completely horrified; but we were off, before she had time to get her horror into words. Besides, with Don, I did n't need a chaperon, not in that funny little town; and, anyway, Mrs. Carhart was lovely to me, lovely, and Mrs. Gerrans, too." She paused for breath. Then she added, with a laugh, "After all, as it came out, Uncle Stuart, it was Don who needed the chaperon, not me."

"So it seems." The voice of Stuart Rhodes was singularly absent, in view of the fact that it was his own son whose heart affairs were the subject of discussion. Then he spoke more alertly. "After all, child, where you are, there is usually a train of men. What about Quebec? Was it so there?"

She shook her head.

"Oh, no; there's not a train of anybody. The place is too small for that. Of course, I met all sorts of people; but I only saw much of the three: Mr. Fordyce, and Mr. Gerrans, and Mr. Tremaine."

"And they?" her uncle urged her past her pause.

Hilda looked up with a frankness which was a little forced and unnatural.

"Mr. Fordyce is a dear little owl of a lawyer, as good as gold and as ugly as sin. Mr. Gerrans made love to me; but, as long as he makes love to every single woman he meets, we neither of us took it very hard. In fact," her laugh now was refreshingly unregenerate and natural; "I rather think I may have made love to him back again."

Then Stuart Rhodes nerved himself to the question he had been dreading to ask, for four or five long months.

"And Tremaine?" he inquired, with elaborate unconcern. "What about him?"

Hilda was ready for him, ready, too, to meet the question. With an unconcern as elaborate as his had been, she packed together the thick sheets of Allison's letter, while she made answer, with a hastily-smothered yawn, —

"Mr. Tremaine? I call him the human enigma, Uncle Stuart; and you know I always do fight very shy of an enigma."

And upon that assurance Stuart Rhodes was content to rest. Even though a word to Hilda might have safeguarded all her future, he would have been the last to speak it, since such a word would have endangered his own peace of mind.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

HILDA and Donald, that summer, came back to a changed Quebec. They had left it empty and frozen; they returned to find it torrid and crammed. Hungry and hurrying tourists jostled sleek and leisurely notables at every turn. There were grandstands and arches and dangling mottoes; the sound of many bands tore the air until, from sheer excess of brazen melody, one longed for the good dignity of silence. However, mercifully for the nerves and tempers of the two Americans, the worst of this state of things developed bit by bit and after their arrival. They made their appearing midway between the June stagnation and the turbulence that only reached its climax in the late days of the festival.

None the less, to both of them Quebec seemed unduly crowded, unduly like any other tourist city. At the Château, the good old restful atmosphere was gone; the waiters bustled more; the inmates were a shade more showy, more self-conscious, more vehemently assertive of their rights to prompt attention. And yet, both Don and Hilda admitted that it did seem very good to follow the head waiter up the dining-room to their old, wonted table, mysteriously reserved for them in all the bedlam, very good to make out here and there in the throng around them a familiar, albeit nameless, face, very good to have the welcome from their own fa-

little German waiter who knew by long experience all the things they did not like the best.

And, if the Château seemed good to them, better still was the quiet summer evening when, in answer to an insistent message on the telephone, they left the noisy chaos that, in summer, centres in the Ring, and went down across the deserted Battery to seek admittance at the Carhart door. The windows of the upper drawing-room stood wide open now; the grate was cold, and the sofa and piano had been moved back to their more orthodox positions in the corners of the room. Otherwise, the place was quite unchanged. Allison was unchanged, too. Bright, strong and serene, she met them with a quiet welcome which carried far more weight than effusive words. Her hand shut hard on their fingers, she smiled at Don, kissed Hilda; and then, with the air of presenting something rather priceless, she handed them on to her waiting mother. There had been no chatter, no exuberant caress; yet both her guests were conscious that, to Allison Carhart, their return was a cause for honest happiness.

For Don, Quebec held one standard only for beauty. Hilda, however, was impressed with a subtle change in Allison. It was not only that, in her thin white frock, she was perhaps more comely than in her winter costumes. More than that, she seemed to Hilda to have gained new gentleness, new charm. Always she had been a glorious creature, always the embodiment of strength and of refinement. Now, however, she was all woman. The boylike frankness which had marked her manner in the earlier days of their acquaintance had yielded to the woman's gentler intuitions. And Hilda, knowing out of her study of her own heart something

of the reason for this change, yet wondered who could be the cause. Later, much later, and when they were quite alone, she believed that Allison would gratify her curiosity. Meanwhile, it was very good to be back again in the huge old room which she had learned to know so well, good to be face to face once more with Allison Carhart.

Don quite promptly had dropped down on the sofa with Mrs. Carhart; but Hilda was too restless in her enjoyment to settle down at once. Instead, with Allison at her side, she strolled across the room and stood there, looking out into the street and into the Hôtel-Dieu garden just across its gray stone wall. They had dined a little early, that night, and now the long, long summer day was but just drawing to a close. The sky above the city was changing from blue to opalescent gray, and the atmosphere seemed charged with infinitesimal and glittering particles which caught the level rays of the falling sun, until the air was threaded thick with beaded lines of gold. Beneath the dazzling coverlet of the gold-shot air and the opalescent, arching canopy of sky, the great convent, hospital and cloister, pointed chapel roof and green expanse of garden, seemed quietly awaiting the coming of the night, the time for rest and peaceful dreams. Here and there beyond a wide-open window of the wards, a moving figure flitted to and fro. Otherwise, there was no sign of life, no stir of any sort, save in a distant corner of the convent garden where two nuns, their skirts looped high about them to escape the heavy dew, were walking slowly to and fro between the beds, giving the young green plants their good-night drink. Once, as they came forward from their shadowy corner to the patch of light nearer

the open window outside the wall, the sun-rays struck upon their clumsy water pots and on the sprinkling streams, touching with golden glory even their humble task. Then, a moment later, a door swung open in the low white wall parting the garden from the cloister court, and a nun came slowly into sight. All in white, save for the great black veil about her head and shoulders, she moved slowly, weakly, leaning on the stick she carried in her hand. And, just as she came to the edge of the patch of belated sunlight, the sun dropped down behind the chapel, and the world turned gray.

Hilda shivered a little, as she faced about from the open window.

"How quickly one does feel the sunset!" she said, while Allison drew out her own old favourite chair, and another for herself. "And how quickly one does get used to the other way of thinking, Allison! Before I went away, I grew rather to like the nuns. Now I find that they depress me, just as they did at first."

Allison laughed.

"You'd get accustomed to it, child, if you lived here," she told Hilda. "We think nothing at all about them; they are a matter of no more concern than any other women we don't meet out at dinner. But never mind the nuns; they are n't half as important as you are. Do sit down, Hilda, and tell me all about things. Your letters are mainly remarkable for the information that they leave out."

Hilda obeyed the first half of Allison's request, and nestled her fluffy head against the friendly, well-remembered hollows of the chair back.

"What do you want to know?" she demanded lazily.

Allison's reply was comprehensive.

"Everything."

"What kind? Besides, I'd rather talk about you," Hilda said a little bit perversely.

"Me? There's never anything to tell. Besides, you can find it out from observation. We are jogging on in just the same old track. In proof of which, I may as well add that Ethel and Gerry will be in, a little later."

"How good!" Hilda's laziness departed. "And Mr. Tremaine?" she queried, after an instant's pause. "Is he coming, too?"

Allison's face lost somewhat of its serenity.

"I have n't seen him for several days," she said evasively. "I told Gerry to be sure to tell him when you were coming, though. I think he may be in, before the evening is over. What has Don heard from him?"

Hilda spread out her hands, palms up, across her lap. Then she shook her head. To Allison's keen eyes, there was more bravado than mirth in the little gesture, more, too, in the tone of Hilda's answer, —

"Not one single word of any sort. He appears to have excommunicated us from out his circle." Then she dropped her mockery and spoke more gravely. "And, Allison, I thought better of him than that," she said, with a quiet dignity which showed no trace of rancour.

Nevertheless, Allison rose to his defence.

"Bernon is n't fickle, Hilda. If he has n't written to Don, there has been some sort of a good reason. I know him well enough to be sure of that."

Hilda looked up in swift suspicion.

"Has he said —"

"Not a word," Allison interrupted her. "Bernon

does n't talk, you know. Besides, one reason may be that he's not been well, this spring."

"How do you mean?" This time, Hilda looked up abruptly, careless, for the moment, how much both voice and eyes might betray to Allison.

Allison's own anxiety rang in her answer.

"Hilda, I don't know. All the spring, he has n't seemed at all well, not like himself. If I ask him, he laughs and says he is all right; but he is n't. Gerry and I have talked about it by the hour. We neither of us know any reason for it. We have wondered, sometimes, if you knew anything about it, Hilda. You always were such good friends with him." And Allison turned on Hilda her steadfast and inquiring eyes, as if to see whether this young American were seeking to conceal a guilty knowledge of the cause of all the change in Bernon Tremaine.

However, the transparent honesty of Hilda's reply dismissed her latent suspicions.

"I did n't even know he was n't well, Allison," she answered slowly. "I am sorry, very sorry, too, to hear about it. He always seemed strong as a bit of copper wire; only — Don't you remember that last day at the Falls? He was dull then, and said he was n't well." And Hilda fell into silent study of the rug at her feet.

"It's so unlike him," Allison broke the silence; "not to be going into things, this summer, with all the rest of us."

Hilda looked up again.

"Is n't he?"

"No; not a thing. He says he has n't time; but Gerry and I believe that is only an excuse. We both

of us have laboured with him, separately and then together; but it has n't done the slightest bit of good. We tried to get Mr. Fordyce to help us out. He and Bernon are seeing a good deal of each other now, and we thought his word would count a little."

"Did it?"

Allison shrugged her shoulders in frank disgust.

"He washed his hands of the whole affair, refused to say a single word," she replied a little tartly. Then she went back to Tremaine once more. "He was expecting to go out on the south shore again," she told Hilda; "his plans were all made to start, last week. He seemed happier about it than we'd seen him in a long time. Then, just at the very last minute, something went wrong about the office here. It has been growing more important lately, it seems; and the man who was to have taken it over, is ill in London. They have promised to save the place for him, and nobody knows when he will be well enough to come out. Of course, they don't want to break in a new man for just a few weeks, so poor Bernon is tied up here in town, looking out for things, when his one ambition is to get back into the bush." And Allison abruptly dropped the subject, as she arose to greet her entering guests, Gerrans and Ethel Cameron.

The flurry of salutation ended, Don, exuding happiness at every pore, annexed himself to Ethel. Gerrans, meanwhile, dropped down next Hilda and fell to paying court to her in almost his old fashion. Not quite, however. Heretofore, he had sought to convey the impression that she was the one woman in all his world. Now, it was plain that she was the next thing to it; with that one missing, Gerrans would turn to

her for support and sympathy. His unconscious trick of referring all things back to Allison Carhart, of including Allison Carhart in all his statements, was as eloquent to Hilda as had been Allison's own naïve references to "Gerry and I." And yet, oddly enough, each one of them appeared to be totally blind to what all this portended. Their very blindness added to the charm. Never were two potential lovers drifting more surely, more steadily upon the rock of mutual explanation; never were two more blissfully unconscious that such a rock loomed in their common course. And, meanwhile, across the room, Don and Ethel had arrived at such a stage of mutual understanding that explanations had become for ever needless. Hilda Lynde was not especially self-assertive in her demands of life. Nevertheless, for the moment, she felt alone and out of things.

She was struggling hard against this feeling, when suddenly, cutting athwart the jovial talk of Gerrans, she heard the little stir of a fresh arrival. She looked up carelessly. Then she dropped her dazzled eyes, fearful lest they betray to all the world some hint of the joy which set her heart to bumping. Bernon Tremaine was entering the room.

Later, that night, long after Don had fallen asleep, she sat alone and tried to analyze the evening. For her sudden exhilaration she was able to account easily enough; what she could not account for was the depression which followed swiftly, which even now was still hanging over her. It was causeless, she told herself, causeless and totally ridiculous, result of the exaggerated egotism which grows out of the extreme fatigue produced by a night spent in a sleeper and by

subsequent unpacking. She condemned it absolutely; nevertheless, it would not down. Worst of all, so far as concerned her girlish self-respect, it centred in Bernon Tremaine.

Tremaine had met her cordially. There was no gainsaying that. Totally disregarding Allison's manifest surprise at his appearing, and only halting before Don for a brief handgrip, he had gone straight to her side, had shut his fingers over hers in a greeting which spoke his pleasure more than many effusive words could ever have done. He had explained to her a little eagerly that he had called her up, only just now, at the Château; that, missing her there, he had followed on to Allison's on the chance of overtaking her. What he did not explain, however, was the grim determination with which, realizing that their meeting was inevitable, he had steeled himself to face that meeting as promptly, as unconcernedly as he might. Instead of that, he told her of his pleasure at the news of her return, speaking with a cheery frankness which would have been death to all sentiment upon her part, had it not been for his veiled eyes and for the little catch that, every now and then, came in his breath, a catch which instantly he changed into a cough before once more he resumed his story. He had not looked for them back so soon, he said. Gerrans had called him up, that afternoon, to tell him that they had arrived. Accordingly — and now his face lighted with at least a trace of his old, boyish smile, — accordingly, he had broken an engagement, and had come to Allison's in search of them.

Taken quite simply, it was a pleasant, cordial statement of a most matter-of-fact welcome, just such a

welcome as Hilda might have received from any one out of a score of her friends in Quebec. From Tremaine, she had looked for something else, something more vital. The single word of greeting he had given her on the bridge, in that winter sunset of five months ago, had held ten times the meaning of all this present prolix explanation. Then his voice, his whole being had throbbed in answer to her approach. Now the throb was completely lacking. Worst of all, Hilda questioned whether it ever would come again. What had she done to kill it?

Her hands locked nervously together in her lap, she sat and pondered. Pondering, however, brought her no nearer to an answer to her question. Instead, it sent whizzing into her mind the memory that, once upon a time, she had sat in that very chair in that very room, and clasped her hands behind her head and thought about Tremaine. How different it all had seemed then! And the throb was dead? Perhaps. Still, it was not she who had killed it. Of so much she was certain. Perhaps it was not dead, only dying. Then there was still a chance, a little, little chance that she could woo it back again to life. For, in that instant, Hilda Lynde faced the naked fact of her exceeding love of Bernon Tremaine, faced it and was not ashamed. At the first, he had been the one to realize the love that lay between them, to accept it as a lasting bond. And she, trusting his integrity completely, had come to realize it in her turn. Now, for some reason which she could not analyze, he had cast the realization from him. It was she now who held fast to it; she who, still trusting implicitly in his integrity, would do her best, her modest woman's best, to make him take it up once

more. That he had relinquished it unwillingly, she only needed to look into his worn face to feel assured.

The long summer days that followed, Hilda saw astongly little of Tremaine. Society, that portion of society, that is, with which Hilda's lot was cast, was all agog over the approaching festival. When there was not a rehearsal for the pageants, there was a tea or a dinner on hand somewhere, with the pageants and their costumes and their attendant jollities for the main theme of conversation. The usual summer life of the city was at a standstill; the usual summer exodus had been postponed. Instead, the younger set had given itself over to a sort of anticipatory merrymaking which filled the summer hours to overflowing.

In all of this, by prearranged agreement, places had been held for Don and Hilda; and into it they now flung themselves, heart and soul. One set in one especial minuet, in particular, had been kept empty till their coming. Now it lacked one couple of completion. Contrary to all their hopes, Tremaine had remained obstinately aloof; and Fordyce, dancing with Hilda, was forced to seek another opposite.

"I'm sorry, Tremaine, infernally sorry," Fordyce had blurted out, one night, when he had sat late, smoking with Tremaine. "What's more, I'm afraid the time will come when you'll be sorry, too."

"Not likely, Fordyce," Tremaine made answer briefly.

"But — Not if you danced with Miss Lynde?" Fordyce inquired, with a brave generosity he would have shown to no man living but Tremaine, and to him only in his present trouble. "If you'll come into the thing, I'll even step out, and take up with the

knock-kneed Garthwaite. Really, Tremaine, I wish you would."

"Really, Fordyce, I wish I could," Tremaine paraphrased his words. "It is n't best, though, much as I'd like it. If I did, it would only make matters so much worse."

Then it was that Fordyce broke down his customary wall of discretion.

"Hang it, man! What the devil is the matter, anyway?" he burst out. Then, swiftly as he had yielded, swiftly he controlled himself. Rising, he crossed the room and shut a heavy hand on Tremaine's shoulder. "Forgive me," he said quickly. "I did n't mean to be a brute, Tremaine. It's only that now and then it gets on my nerves to see my best friend in trouble, and not to be doing one single thing to help."

For a little time, Tremaine smoked on without speaking. Then he raised his head and looked up into the face of Fordyce with eyes unveiled, but infinitely sad.

"Thanks," he said slowly. "There's nothing doing now, nothing to worry about, Fordyce, so go on and have your fling, and forget all about me."

"But, if one can't?" Fordyce muttered, half to himself.

Tremaine turned in his chair and faced him.

"You can't, Fordyce; that's the thing about you, the thing that makes me hang on to you so. You don't forget, and yet you don't try to vivisect me, every time you come in range. It makes you a relief in troublous times; but there's no reason I should be a skeleton at the feast, for all that. Take my good advice, then. Leave Miss Garthwaite to prance and do her epigrams

in some obscure corner, and you hunt up some one who can really dance, to fill the set."

His hands in his pockets and his head a little on one side, Fordyce stood facing him, a lean little owlish figure, yet a picture of loyal, honest good will.

"But we wanted you," he said regretfully at length.

"Impossible." Tremaine was once more smoking steadily.

Fordyce took his hands out of his pockets, clinched them, thumbs out, then eyed his left thumb critically.

"Have you thought at all about Miss Lynde in this thing?" he inquired, not of Tremaine, apparently, but of the thumb.

Tremaine bowed his head without speaking. Then, after an interval, he added, —

"I am thinking of no one else."

And Fordyce bowed, too, but in acceptance. He realized that this was final.

More than a half hour passed by, before either of the men spoke again. Fordyce sat passive, waiting until such time as Tremaine should once more come to the surface of his own thoughts; and Tremaine, brooding heavily, was oblivious of all things around him. This lasted long; but at length it broke, and slowly, almost wonderingly, Tremaine came back again into the present hour and place. He sighed a little wearily, as if his thoughts had tired him, and he drew his hand once and twice across his brow, as if, by smoothing out the lines of worry, he could brush away the burden of his cares. Then, turning, he looked over his shoulder at Fordyce, still smoking in the other corner; and, yielding to some impulse, he spoke out.

"Fordyce, it's I am the brute; not you. However, there are some things that are bound to brutalize a man. But, for God's sake, have patience, and hold on a little longer. I can't get on without you, even now; and I've a notion that the time is coming soon when I may need you even more than I do now. When that day comes, though, I shall speak out and make a clean breast of everything. Else, it would n't be quite fair to you."

And Fordyce merely nodded, and held out his clinched-up hand.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THE next day, Hilda took her turn.

"I don't see why not?" she urged.

"Not time enough," Tremaine told her.

"Nonsense!" she chid him, much as she might have chidden an ailing and perverse child. "You know that is nothing at all but an excuse. There is n't an office in the city that does n't close in time for these rehearsals."

"Mine is different," he explained, with the apparent frankness which was marking all his intercourse with her nowadays. "Mine is n't exactly a town office, you know. I have all sorts of contractors coming in from the line and at all sorts of hours. When a man has to file an official report, or get fresh instructions from headquarters, while his men are kicking their heels and waiting for him to come back to camp, he is n't going to —"

"Mr. Tremaine," she interrupted him, half way through his patient explanation; "the crude fact is, you don't want to do it."

"No. At least, I don't believe it would be best," he answered.

"Why? Are n't you well?" Her voice caught a little, as she asked the question up to which, for two weeks now, she had been screwing her courage.

His laugh, instead of being reassuring, grated a little on her ears.

"Perfectly, Miss Lynde."

Deliberately she allowed her eyes to search his face. Up to now, she had studied him often and by stealth, but when his face had been a little turned aside. Now, justified by the directness of her friendly question, her gaze searched his eyes, his lips, his whole appearance. Even accustomed as already she had grown to the subtle change in him, she was shocked at what her closer study of him was betraying. His face, always lean, was gaunt, and there were hollows around the eyes, matching the deep-cut lines that fell in vertical diagonals beside his close-shut lips. He had grown thin. His temples showed it, and the up-standing sinews of his neck above his collar. The whole man, it was plain, was out of condition, worn threadbare by some nervous strain that was eating the best of his life away. Nevertheless, his eyes met her gaze unflinchingly, and with a curious appeal within their amber depths; and his smile, equally appealing, would have been quite enough to disarm her criticism, if only by the way it admitted her right to criticize. There was something infinitely pitiful in the whole look of the man, nursing some hidden, ugly secret that was slowly blasting his life, brave, uncomplaining, and yet always, in her presence, wearing this manner of faint deprecation, of tacit entreaty for her forgiveness of the change in him.

Hilda met his eyes as bravely as she could, read their unspoken message, and then, smiling bravely in reply, she fibbed just as bravely.

"No," she said, with a mendacity palpable to them

both; "you are n't ill. That's plain enough. When we came up, I thought you were a little thin; but you look better now, or else I'm getting used to you. However, if you are n't ill, you must be shamming. Oh, by the way, that reminds me. How is pretty Sister St. Saba?"

The change which came over Tremaine's face was almost imperceptible. Hilda, though, her eyes and nerves sharpened to the last degree of acuteness, caught the change.

"So that is it!" she commented swiftly to herself. "At least, what can it be?" Then once more she addressed Tremaine. "I hope you gave her all my messages," she added.

Was it imagination; or did she see him wince? But, an instant later, he answered her in just his usual tone. When she heard it, Hilda knew a little why it was that Tremaine had grown so thin. Absolute self-control, absolute repression of one's secret emotions, she too was finding out, was bound to leave its mark upon the outward and physical strength. Not even careful massage could always rub out the lines which her own mirror sometimes showed her, after one of her rare talks with Bernon Tremaine. And he? A great, protecting pity surged up within her, as she glanced furtively up into his set face. For the time being, the pity almost cast out her love, such love as maid is used to give to man. She longed to fling her arm around his shoulders, and beg him to tell her all about his worries, and let her plan with him how to make them better, just as so often she had done with Don, when the sunbeams that crowded his jovial life had tangled themselves into inconvenient knots. But she dismissed the

pity rudely and in haste. Pity might be akin to love; but not the sort of love she would choose to bestow upon Tremaine. It had been his very virility, his self-reliance, even in his aloofness, which at the first had drawn her to him. And he was just as virile now. It was only her own sentimental maunderings which tried to make him over into an object of maudlin sympathy. Men did not want sympathy, anyway; at least, not from women. They either wanted to be loved, or else to be let alone. Hilda, true to her theories, rudely dismissed her pity. None the less, it had left its mark.

But the echo of Tremaine's words was still sounding in her ears, —

"Really, I've hardly seen Sister St. Saba, since you went away. She is very weak and ill, this spring. No one seems to know just what the trouble is."

And Hilda recalled herself from her reflections, in time to answer, —

"Poor, dear little lady! And she was such a spotless little lady, too! It seemed as if no smirch of pain could ever touch her." Then she dismissed the nun, and came back to her charge. "Mr. Tremaine, I don't understand you at all, this summer," she said, with gay asperity.

"But why?"

"It is n't like you to stay out of this thing. You were pointed out to me, when I first came, as the one man who did everything."

"You must have mixed me up with Gerrans," he evaded her.

"Everything," she repeated. Then she looked up at him and laughed, counting, the while, upon her fingers. "You ski-jump," she said; "likewise you engineer;

likewise you play hockey, and paddle a canoe, and draw things on menu cards, and even have the patience to doddle over bridge. Likewise," she looked up once more, and now it was her face that was appealing; "likewise, you dance on skates."

Into his eyes there leaped an answering flash of fire, showing that he too held the common memory sacred.

"And so do you," he told her, and his voice had fallen down an octave.

Purposely she allowed the pause to lengthen. She was not unmaidenly in this thing, not lacking in any modesty. It was only that she was very modern, very sensible. She was quite aware that, not so very long ago, Tremaine and she had loved each other, as much aware of it as if, each to each, their troth had been plighted. Something, some evil wind, had blown between them. It was her woman's right and privilege, she felt assured, to show Tremaine that she had neither caused nor foreseen the change in their relations; that, for herself, she was quite unchanged. Once she was sure he fully understood this, well and good. Then the matter must rest within his hands. Till then, she too had her rights. It was still for her to do her best to save them both from some vague misunderstanding which might ripe and ripe, until it caused their common and undying misery. Accordingly, she allowed the pause to lengthen, to grow into a silence which lasted from Claire Fontaine quite to the Protestant Home.

"Yes," she assented then; "but, you see, I don't do anything else."

"Only get run away with, and dropped out on the middle of the ice-bridge," he made slow reminder.

This time, Hilda felt her cheeks tingle hotly. At

least, he did remember the old days, the good days when his attitude to her had left a little to the imagination. Since then, it seemed to Hilda, the wine of his presence had turned into skimmed milk, and they both were growing thin upon the change. At least, though, it was good to find that he too occasionally thought backward to the wine, and with evident regret.

Yielding to some sudden, unforeseen emotion, she turned to him in direct appeal.

"You do remember it, too?" she asked, and voice and eyes were eager. "What good times we used to have! And do you realize that our old set would just fill up one group of the *pavane*? For the sake of that, won't you come into it? For the sake of all the jolly days we had, last winter?"

Without speaking, without lifting his eyes from the green field beyond her, he shook his head. Hilda, watching, had an instinctive knowledge that his refusal was beyond all gainsaying. Nevertheless, —

"Besides, think of Miss Garthwaite! It's too bad to leave her out, when she does so love to dance," she added, and, in spite of her perturbation, her face broke into a smile.

"Hang Miss Garthwaite!" Tremaine replied succinctly.

And then he changed the subject.

She had come upon him quite by chance, that afternoon, and for the third time only since Don and she had met him at the Carharts', the night of their return. How long it had seemed to her since then, she had not dared to trust herself to count. Neither had she dared allow herself to think how all her anticipations and plans, from the hour of her leaving Quebec in February

up to the time of her return, had centred in Tremaine, in the things they would do together, in the things they would say to each other, while they were doing them. In the winter, she had seen him, almost every day. Now she had seen him three or four times: at Allison's, the night of their arrival; at the Château, one day when Don had dragged him almost forcibly into lunching with them, and once again at Allison's when, consoling herself for some broken plan or other, she had dropped in unexpectedly at tea-time, to find Tremaine ahead of her and brooding silently above his empty cup. At her coming, he had roused himself and had flung himself into the talk. However, it was plain that his mind was elsewhere, and he had excused himself and gone off after it, at the earliest possible minute.

To-day, crossing to the post office to mail some letters, she had met him again. This time, he had turned of his own accord, gone back inside the office with her, come out again and, at her side, had crossed the Ring and walked out Louis Street, much in his old accustomed fashion. And the very usualness of his mood, coupled with the fact that she was on her way out to a rehearsal, had lured her on to urging him to change his mind and join them in the pageants. His refusal had convinced her of its absolute finality. Nevertheless, it left her pondering.

She was still pondering when, after rehearsal, Fordyce walked home beside her; and her reverie made her conversation absent and fragmentary. However, long before they reached the Château court, she had realized her rudeness and, by way of apology, she had insisted that Fordyce should come to dine with them. And Fordyce, nothing loath, consented.

Later, he and Don took themselves out to the terrace, while they smoked. Still later, when Don went away in search of Ethel, Fordyce returned to the round window of the drawing-room where Hilda had agreed to wait for him. However, when he crossed the room to where she sat, a slim white figure silhouetted against the purple afterglow outside the window, she might have been a score of miles away, as far as any consciousness of his coming went in measurement.

"A penny for your thoughts," he offered tritely.

At his voice, she started. As she looked up, he thought he saw the unaccustomed tears hang heavy in her eyes.

"They were n't worth it," she said a little faintly; but she tried to smile.

"Sorry," he said. "Still, sometimes they gather value with the telling. You might risk it."

For a moment, she sat silent, studying the kind, ugly face of the man before her, deciding how far she could, how far she ought to, trust it.

"I was thinking about Mr. Tremaine," she said simply then.

From his place on the rug where he stood before her, his hands, thumbs out, thrust into his distended pockets, Fordyce surveyed her with a quizzical benignity. Hilda sat watching him, wondering apathetically whether in all the world there was any other man able to triumph over so uncouth a pose. Then she dismissed her apathetic wonder, as Fordyce spoke.

"Miss Lynde," he advised her kindly, and with all his humour replaced by sudden gravity; "I would n't worry about Tremaine more than I could help. We all know he is in some bad trouble that he's keeping to himself; we none of us know what it is. Sorry as we

all are, the best thing we can do is to keep still and stand by, ready to help him when he gets to where he wants us. But, in the meantime, the more we worry, the more we every one of us are bound to lose our grip." And, his say said once for all, Fordyce took his hands out of his pockets, sat down beside her, crossing his legs with manifest intent to stay a while, and fell into discussion of the next day's plans.

During the most part of the summer days, the plans were elaborate and called for much discussion. It was no easy thing to fit their long hours afield, driving, canoeing, walking, into the increasingly rigid framework of the demands upon their time made by the approaching festival. Only one summer month could Don and Hilda give them; into that one month must be crowded at least a taste of everything that went to make the summer joyful. It was the old experience of the winter in new guise, yet with a difference. Only five months before, there had been eight of them in all the plans. Now there were only four; for even Don and Ethel, as the time ran on, showed an increasing disposition to get lost, and to come straying homeward by themselves, so blissful that it seemed mere rude impertinence when the others demanded explanation.

Gerrans and Allison, however, did their best, and Fordyce offered himself, a willing victim, for any sacrifice demanded of him as aid for Hilda's entertainment. And so the July days wore away, each one a little shorter, a little bit more full than the last had been. But, at the same slow rate, the nights grew longer. To Hilda, her head propped on her folded arms, her wide-open eyes fixed on the stars outside her window, these nights seemed wellnigh endless. By day, she could

down her thoughts by sheer force of wilful attention to the bustling sequence of her entertainment. By night, they came sweeping back upon her: thoughts, worries, love, even her great, protecting pity for the man whom, nowadays, she saw so rarely, whose worn, still face, however, never once left the retina of her mind. For, as the time went on, Hilda's love for Bernon Tremaine was slowly turning from the self-assertive, self-centred love of the maiden to the self-denying love of the full-grown woman ready to sacrifice herself and even her love, if need be, for the betterment of him who has called forth the love. In the earlier days of her return, Hilda had thought of Tremaine merely as her lover; now she knew that he was the man she loved, purely, protectingly, and without passion. In the earlier days, her plans and hopes had concerned them both; now they concentrated themselves solely upon him. Over and over again she put the question to herself: not, now, what should she do to preserve Tremaine's love intact for herself; but what could she do to bring him back into something vaguely like content. She only dismissed the question, still unanswered, when she recalled the charge which Fordyce had laid upon her; when also she recalled the face of Fordyce, lean, ugly, spectacled, but glowing with his own good will, until his whole personality seemed to her throbbing, vital, like a charged electric wire. And it was resting in the strength and judgment of Fordyce that Hilda, like a tired child, usually fell asleep.

Time, however, never halts for busy days and sleepless nights. July waxed; then it began to wane, and its waning brought unwonted, even unlooked-for, changes into the quiet streets of the lazy, gray old city.

Decorations blazed up upon every hand; every day brought its fresh quota of tourists and of notables and, above all, of troops, of sunburnt, strong-faced men in scarlet coats, in khaki, even in Highland plaid and tasselled sporran; while the wide river underneath the Château windows filled itself with every known species of craft, from white steam yacht to dun-gray armoured cruiser. Then came the great Field Marshal, dun-gray, too, tiny and commanding; then came the initial pageants, and then came the Prince of Wales. By that time, the little city appeared to have gone off its head completely. Never was such a bedlam of blaring bands and glittering uniforms and galloping horses. When there was not a review of some sort somewhere, or a gymkhana, then somewhere else somebody was making speeches. In all the intervals, they went to dinners, or had regattas, or planted trees; and, in the thickest of all the social fray, there was always Hilda Lynde, eager, alert, smiling at everything and everybody. Only her most intimate friends could ever realize that both her alertness and her smiles concealed some reservation. And so the days of the festival week went by, and Friday came, and brought the night for the royal ball.

Gerrans was taking Hilda to the ball, that night. Allison had looked out for that, annexing Fordyce, meanwhile, to her own family party. And Fordyce, seeing through her kind manoeuvre, had yielded without protest. Tacitly, by now, the three friends had united in an alliance to prevent Hilda from missing Tremaine's old-time fashion of assuming as his right the place beside her. Fordyce would have preferred taking Hilda, himself, that night. Nevertheless, if Allison

thought best that she be handed over to another of their loyal little group, he was prepared to yield to Allison's superior judgment.

He caught no glimpse of Hilda, then, until, on the arm of Gerrans, she came slowly up the scarlet carpet to the entrance of the ballroom and paused there for a moment, to watch the dancing which already had begun. Flushed with excitement, her pale brown eyes sparkling, and her whole face smiling in answer to the talk of Gerrans, she looked to Fordyce the embodiment of girlish grace and dignity and happiness. Her frock was girlish, too, albeit sumptuous. She was all in white chiffon, soft and fluffy and embroidered here and there with little silver love-knots; and another, larger knot of great milky pearls lay against one round white shoulder. Otherwise, there was not an ornament in sight, not a frill to mar the simple softness of her whole attire, spotless and graceful as the habit of a nun, as spotless and as graceful, too, as the huge white flag, sewn thick with golden fleur-de-lys, that hung above the royal dais. In after years, when life had taught him to know her in her every mood and guise, it was in that soft, white frock that Fordyce loved best to think of Hilda Lynde.

The evening was still young, when the ball was at its height. The Prince had come, had made his courteous tour of the brilliant rooms, had taken his place beneath the pure white standard of the old régime; and the dancing, which had paused to watch his entrance, had started up once more. Hilda had been swallowed up in the throng; and Fordyce, regardless of their relative inches, was dutifully waltzing with the Aunt, when he felt a sudden touch upon his shoulder.

"Tremaine is outside, Fordyce," some one said.
"He wants to speak to you."

A sudden contraction of Fordyce's eyes was the only sign he gave of being aware of some approaching crisis. Still talking cheerily, he steered the Aunt into a corner where his quick glance had made out an elderly and protecting friend; then he excused himself and went in search of Tremaine.

He found him at the head of the grand stairway; and, at a glance, Fordyce realized that the crisis, whatever was its nature, was a grave one. No trivial cause could bring such a man as Bernon Tremaine into that assembly, still in his morning clothes, and with a look of such mortal dread written large upon his face. The outer halls were full, full the grand staircase; but Fordyce lost no time in threading his way through the crowd, and shutting a strong hand on Tremaine's arm.

"Steady, man," he said, quite low. "What is the matter?"

Tremaine spun around to face him.

"Where is Hilda?" he asked breathlessly; and, so great was the excitement of the moment, that neither man realized that Tremaine had spoken of her by her given name.

"With Gerrans, somewhere or other."

"And Don?"

"Who knows? With Ethel, probably. Most likely they are mooning around together in some inconspicuous corner," Fordyce told him.

Tremaine gave a short, hard sigh of relief.

"So much the better! It is Hilda I want. It's better that Don should n't know; at least, not till she tells him. Fordyce, I have been looking for you every-

where. I need you. Sister St. Saba —" His words fell sharply, incisively. "You remember the nun who nursed me? She is dying, and she wants to talk to Hilda."

"And you want me to hunt her up?" Fordyce queried cheerily, hoping by his own unconcern to break in upon the tension of the other's mood. "All right. I'll be as quick as I can. Where shall I find you?"

He was already starting; but Tremaine laid a detaining hand upon his arm.

"Wait," he said, still with the same incisive crispness. "Before you go to find her, it is only fair to you to tell you why I need you in this thing. If there's a quiet corner in this place, come quick, for God's sake, while you hear me out."

Then Fordyce shut his teeth, and led the way down the stairs and around many corners of the corridor until they came into a place of comparative isolation.

When they came out once more into the glowing lights, Fordyce's teeth were still shut, and his face was ashy gray. Above the joyous blare of the band, above the hum of happy, careless talk, he still could hear Tremaine's voice in its swift appeal, —

"And so I came to you, Fordyce. I had promised that I never would tell Don. I am useless; that is, until she knows it all. But you — You love her enough to be sorry for her, and to be gentle with her, after it's all over."

Then their hands had met in a clasp of silent understanding, and they went their ways: Fordyce back into the gorgeous hall to search its every nook and corner; Tremaine back into the night from which he had lately come.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

AT the door of the brightly-lighted room whence came the murmur of whispered prayers, together with the faint, sweet smell of incense and of the holy oil of the anointing, Fordyce stepped quickly to one side, and Hilda, wondering and a little troubled, went on alone. Her wonder grew when, at her coming, the white-robed, black-veiled nuns, kneeling about the bed, arose and, silent as ghosts, vanished down the corridor outside. Only the Superior remained, still kneeling at the foot of the bed, her veiled head bowed above the beads that dangled from her tight-clasped fingers; and, at the farther side of the narrow bed, two men stood looking down upon their folded arms. One was the grand old doctor, hand in hand with whom Sister St. Saba had waged many a fight against the powers of death. The other man was Bernon Tremaine.

Propped high upon the pillows they had packed about her, Sister St. Saba was the first to be aware of Hilda's coming. Slowly, as if the slight action were a drain upon her failing strength, she slid her hand along the coverlet in the direction of the open door.

"My daughter!" she said faintly.

For one moment only, Hilda paused upon the threshold, waiting until her mind could clearly grasp the meaning of the unaccustomed scene. Fordyce had told her

the barest facts: that Sister St. Saba, for the second time, had been taken with cerebral hæmorrhage; that now, hours after, she had struggled back into full consciousness; and that, once more conscious, she had made demand, imperative, insistent, for the coming of herself, Hilda Lynde. And Hilda, kindly, readily, and without asking longer explanation, had left the ball with Fordyce and gone straight to the Hôtel-Dieu. Fordyce, waiting at her elbow, had winced a little, as he overheard her blithe assurance to Gerrans that she would return as soon as possible. Fordyce was quite well aware that there would be, could be, no return.

Pausing upon the threshold for the instant, Hilda realized that Sister St. Saba's time of consciousness was short, realized that soon the nun, now propped high on her pillows and watching her with deep-set, lambent eyes, would fall into the sleep that knows no waking. In conditions such as this, a pause may seem unending, measured by the few passing moments which part time from eternity. The hands of the Superior shut tighter; the old doctor raised his head and beckoned to the white and silver vision standing upon the threshold.

"My daughter!" Sister St. Saba said again. "Come here, Hilda. Here where I can touch you."

Swift as a homing dove, Hilda crossed the narrow bit of floor between them, and dropped down upon her knees beside the bed. Even then, she yielded to some instinct that she could not analyze; even then, she took no note of the strange use of her given name. The whole scene seemed curiously unreal to her; they all, all, even Sister St. Saba, even she herself, were like actors going through some oft-repeated scene upon a

stage. The real life she knew, the life of blaring bands, and dancing feet, and deep-draped window seats where one could sit and rest a while, the life where she of right belonged and which she had but just now left behind her: this was still coursing in her veins. She would return to it, after a little while, quietly, perhaps, in deference to the scene which just now lay before her. Still, she would return.

And, meanwhile, this scene awaited her, an unfamiliar scene, set in the bare room of the hospital whither, out of her own cell in the cloisters, they had gently borne Sister St. Saba, when the Superior had nodded acquiescence to the strange request for the summoning of Hilda Lynde. It was a small room, and simply furnished; all white, save for the great black squares of the windows, wide-open to the midnight sky. Faintly the night breeze came in through the windows, stirring the folds of the Superior's veil, setting the little flames that tipped the lighted tapers to dancing merrily beneath the steady, overpowering glow of the incandescent lights above. And the incandescent lights glared mercilessly down upon the wan white features of the dying nun, upon the two white-garbed women who knelt beside her, the one in folds of simple serge, dress of her heavenly vocation, the other a mere fluff of dainty tissue, soft and light and silver-spotted, a vision, not of heaven, but of the next thing to it, of the innocent, gay young world. And Hilda, kneeling by the bed, was conscious of all the grim contrast between herself and her surroundings, between her surroundings now and those she had so lately left. She knew no reason for this sudden summons. Try as she would, she could conceive none. She could only knit her fingers hard

together and pray, as never she had prayed before, that she might not fail to answer to this mysterious call upon her womanhood.

And, just across the bed, the man whom she loved more than all the world outside, was standing motionless, waiting for something, what she did not know.

"Hilda! My little Hilda!" With a tremendous effort of her failing strength, the nun's fingers rested for an instant upon the bowed and fluffy head, then fell away, to lie upon the round bare shoulder close beside her.

"Yes, dear." Hilda spoke as gently as to a tired child. "I came, as soon as I knew you wanted me."

"I have always wanted you, Hilda," Sister St. Saba answered, with the directness which comes when time measures itself by moments, not by hours. "It was impossible for me to have you. I could only have the one. Bernon was old enough to realize, to wonder. I kept him."

"Bernon?" The little accent of question was intended to recall the nun who, Hilda thought, was drifting to delirium.

Instead, Sister St. Saba's hand rested a shade more heavily upon the bare white shoulder, and she spoke again, insistently.

"Bernon Tremaine. Your brother, Bernon."

The truth had come at last. Strange to say, albeit wholly unforeseen, it carried instant conviction into Hilda's mind. She cast one glance, dazed, agonized, up at Tremaine across the narrow bed. His eyes answered her, and her head sank down, down, to rest upon Sister St. Saba's chilling fingers.

"My — brother!" she said brokenly at length.

"Yes, Hilda. You are both my children, my darling children."

Silence descended on the little room. The candles leaped and flickered. At the foot of the bed, the tears were trickling fast through the Superior's fingers, a rosary of glittering drops, wrung out of woman's sympathy. Tremaine stood motionless, his head sunk on his chest, but his eyes fixed intently on the still white figure kneeling opposite, a figure almost buried in her sea of silver-flecked tissues, buried in the heavy serge which covered Sister St. Saba's outstretched arm. And, while his very being seemed to wait for Hilda's rallying, the doctor was quite as intent upon the rallying of the nun who, her secret spoken out at last, had fallen back upon her pillows, breathing quickly. Once the doctor, watching, shut his hand upon the hypodermic needle and made a quick step forward. Then he settled back into his place once more. Conscience was a far more powerful quickener than any strychnine. The rallying had come. Sister St. Saba spoke, and tersely. Her story was not yet all told; not, at least, to any one but to her confessor and to the Superior of her order. Perchance she had been a living lie. At least, though, she would not be a dying one.

"Hilda, my little girl," she said, and then she changed the phrase and began again; "children, I have not very long now to stay here with you. I have very much to tell, so I must do my best to make it short and clear. All my life; all your lives, that is, I have been bound, tied down by a cruel, cruel promise. I have kept it faithfully, so faithfully that even," her eyes moved to the Superior, still kneeling at the bed's foot; "I violated the perfect truth of my heavenly vows for the

sake of these earthly ones. I came into this house, this community, with a stain upon my soul; I lived on, stained blackly, for years and years, keeping the stain out of sight of all, instead of trying to have it washed away. But that is all past now, past and over. I have brought it out into sight; and it has been taken all away, all away. To-night, almost for the first time, I dare go forth to meet — my Maker — and — my Master."

This time, the doctor did step forward, the needle in his hand. The delay was long; the rallying was slow. Half way up the road to strength, Sister St. Saba seemed to pause. Then she went slowly on again.

And Hilda, meanwhile, was motionless, not daring to move, to speak, even to pray. All of a sudden, the light of truth had flashed upon her, clear, piercing, merciless. She needed just a little time to grow accustomed to its glare. And now, as yet, she knew only the fact. It was not alone that she had been told it; she knew it. Her whole nature had leaped up in answer, and had proclaimed its truth. It had explained so many things. It would explain so many more. Sister St. Saba had not told her any of the details as yet; and Sister St. Saba's strength was ebbing fast. But, if she stayed very, very still and waited, it all might come in time. Once again and soul to soul, they two had met, they two were waiting: question incarnate, incarnate reply. Only — was there still time?

When Sister St. Saba once more spoke, her voice was fainter, and it seemed to come out of the distance; but it held all its old precision, all its wonted accuracy and force of phrase.

"I shall begin at the beginning," she said slowly. "There are others," she glanced once more at her Superior whose tears, trickling now more slowly, gemmed her thin white hands, as if with glistening diamonds; "others who can tell you the later parts, if I have not the time. I was a headstrong girl, orphan daughter of a judge whose name you all should know. He and the doctor were old friends together, when they were little boys. His happiness was crushed by my mother's death, and he shot himself, when I was ten years old, only ten." Her voice grew wishful on the repeated words. "I was too young to know much about right and wrong. Later, no one ever stopped to teach me. Why should they? I did not belong to any one. They were not at all to blame; each one left it for some one else.

"I went away from Quebec when he died, went away into a convent school. And then, when I was old enough, I took up nursing. It was the best thing, everybody said, for a girl to do. They said I was a good nurse, too. Even the doctor said so, not six months ago." Without turning her head, she smiled; and the old doctor, watching her intently, felt his throat ache at this last message of good will to him.

"My first important case was in New York," Sister St. Saba went on. "It was a fever case, and I made a good record in it. My patient had a friend, a feeble, ailing, fretful little woman, who used to come to see her often in the convalescence. I saw her, too. She was good, and sweet; but she never had the least magnetic charm. One liked her because one knew she was n't bad; not because one had to. You know," again there came the little smile, playing across Sister

St. Saba's wan face and dying away again into the stillness of her features; "know there are some people whom one has to like, in spite of all reason, not because of it. Her husband was one of these people. I knew him later, knew him well, because she asked me to go to her for a few months. I did n't want to go. I did n't like her, and I was sure she did n't need a nurse, sure she was not really ill, only imagined it. I refused to go, even when she cried about it. Then her husband came and asked me, and I went. I liked him; one could n't help it; ar ! I liked him better, as the time went on. He was years older than his wife, much, much older.

"I was with them for one whole year; and then I went away. Not all of me; I left my pride behind. It was the old, old sin, black and horrible, a sin without excuse; but a sin that always brings its own punishment, that always drags the penalty out of you, bit by bit, drop by drop. Oh, my God! My God! And they speak of us who sin as *light*, when we are weighed down, dragged down by the crushing power and penalty of our undoing! Oh, my God!"

It was long, this time, before the rallying began. When it did at last begin, it went on only for a little way. With her first returning strength, Sister St. Saba spoke swiftly, for she knew that now for her the hours had ceased to be, that the moments, even, were fast running into seconds.

"After Bernon was born, his father made a home for us in a little flat, not ten blocks from his house, and I saw him often there, often until after my little girl was born, my baby Hilda." For the moment, Sister St. Saba was totally unconscious of the identity of the

kneeling, bare-necked figure at her bedside. Her thoughts were far off in the past. "She was my baby girl and I was forced to leave her. He came to me, one day when she was about eighteen months old. I had not seen him then for many, many weeks. And he told me bad, bad things, cruel things. He told me that his wife, before long, would have a little baby. That she was nervous and suspicious, and that she finally had accused him of — me. And that he had confessed, and told her everything. There had been a fearful scene; but, in the end, she had forgiven him for the sake of the child, his child and hers. But it was all arranged. I was to go away, and take the boy, and tell people that I was his French nurse, was to go back to Quebec, the city I had left as a ten-year child. But my little girl! Oh, God, my little, little girl! I must give her up to him, to be accepted as his little niece, brought up in his home as his adopted daughter. That was the compromise to which she had agreed. I could not help myself. And I took the money and the boy, and went. What else was there for me to do?"

Longer still, this time, was the rallying, fainter still the voice.

"And their boy was born, Donald Rhodes. Yes, Donald Rhodes," she said more clearly, as if aroused by Hilda's sudden convulsive start. "And my boy was Bernon Tremaine, named for my grandmother's family; and my little Hilda was called Lynde." It was plain to them all now that the sombre eyes, eyes in which the fire was wellnigh quenched for ever, no longer saw the figures grouped about the bed. None the less, the voice went on, pitched now a very little higher.

"The rest of this, you all know. You only have to

ask each other, to ask the Mother Superior. She knows it all, all — now. Only now. I kept my secret long. I guarded my earthly vows at the risk of breaking my heavenly ones. I protected Stuart Rhodes. I was true to him; but I was false to my own soul, false to the God who made it."

With a silent gesture, the doctor, still intent upon the dying nun, ordered Tremaine to yield to him the nearer place, the one close beside the pillow. Silently Tremaine obeyed him. Otherwise, there was no movement in the little room, save for the tiny flames above the candles, dancing gayly upward as if to join the greater, steadier light above. The Superior was motionless. Hilda was motionless. Since that one agonized look across at Tremaine, she had not stirred. Only, now and then, a long, shuddering tremor ran down her silent figure, fluttering her fleecy gown; or a sudden contraction of her round, bare shoulders told to the man, standing and watching from across the bed, that her nervous strength was nearly spent. And Sister St. Saba, her waxy fingers shut upon her cross, not with the old, appealing gesture, but with a firm, caressing touch, her dim eyes lifted to the steady glare above, as if they saw beyond it to the approaching Light Supernal, went feebly, faintly on to the end of her long-delayed confession.

"I always had been Catholic; my people had been Catholic before me. It was natural, when everything but my boy had been snatched from me, when even the name of motherhood was forbidden me, that I should feel the call of my vocation. My sin, I thought, was dead, wiped out by confession, by many penances. I had left it all behind me; and I, a nurse, turned to the

order of the Hospitalières. I had money enough; I had an ancient lineage; I had lived here long enough for my parish priest to be quite willing to certify my character; but, may God have mercy! I had not the one thing of all most needful, a soul unspotted and pure. It was then I lied, then that I buried my older sin beneath another even greater, because, this time, I sinned deliberately and of set purpose. I took my vows; I put on the spotless robes above my sin-spotted self, and I entered my novitiate, my secret unconfessed, entered upon my holy life, a living and incarnate lie."

Sister St. Saba's voice had fallen to a wail, the whimpering of an animal in mortal pain. After an instant's pause, however, it steadied and grew stronger.

"For years, I kept to that old lie. For years, I lived the double life, chaste in the eyes of my confessor, of my Mother Superior, defiled for ever in the eyes of God, defiled, not only by the old-time sin, but by the deception I had heaped upon it, day by day, hoping in time to bury it from sight. But no mountain of good deeds can ever bury an unrepented sin. And, in the end, the dear, good God, distrusting me, laid his hand on the mountain and overturned it all. First, Donald Rhodes came to Quebec, and was introduced to Bernon Tremaine. Then, a few months later," it was evident that now Sister St. Saba was speaking to a crowd of witnesses seen by her dying eyes alone; "then Donald Rhodes came back again and brought his cousin, Hilda Lynde. And I saw her, spoke to her, longed to take her in my arms, for she was my own Hilda, my own baby daughter, grown up to be a gracious woman. But I held myself away from her; and she never knew. But I knew. And then, because no lesser thing could move

me in my sin, two young lives were offered as a sacrifice, for Bernon Tremaine fell in love with Hilda, fell in love with his own sister."

The doctor started forward; then he checked himself. No hypodermic needle could make any difference now. And the low wail went on and on to its destined, pitiful end.

"And then I had to tell him, to warn him. But I did not tell him all. Down in the vaults, one night, I planned how much I could tell him, and yet keep my worst secret safe, keep safe the lie that stained my vows. And I did tell him — only part; and after that I remember nothing, only that I was ill, so ill and so unhappy. He was unhappy, too; he must have been. But he came back to see me," the voice was rising now, was once more growing high and thin; "to see his mother. And, at last, the secret weighed me down, poisoned my life, until I had to tell it. I could n't keep still any longer, Stuart. I loved you; I would have shielded you a little longer; but my soul had some rights of its own, the soul you tried to smother under your tight-bound promises. And so, just this noon, I have confessed it all. I told the priest, and the Mother Superior, told them all about it. I did n't need to tell the dear Lord. He — knew — it all — without my telling."

There was a little flutter of the eyelids. Then, stepping forward, the aged doctor, his own face drawn and white, made a sign to some one waiting on the threshold. An instant later, noiselessly as they had gone away, the nuns came filing in once more and knelt about the bed, while the voice of a priest rose over them and filled the little room with the sonorous phrases of the *Subvenite*, —

*Come to her assistance, ye Saints of God, come forth to
meet her, ye Angels of the Lord: Receiving her Soul: Of-
fering it in the sight of the Most High.*

And, amid the echoes of the ritual she loved so well,
the shriven soul of Sister St. Saba went back again unto
its Maker.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

TWICE only during the short drive homeward did Fordyce speak.

"Tremaine has told me all about it, Miss Lynde," he said, as he put her into a corner of the waiting cab. "He asked me to look out for you, and do anything that I could." And, without more ado, he took his place beside her.

He spoke again, just as the cab was starting up Palace Hill.

"Would n't you rather go to Allison's?" he asked her very gently. "Mrs. Carhart would be so glad to have you sleep there, to-night, you know."

Then he had to bend forward a little, to catch Hilda's almost inarticulate reply, —

"No; home, please. I want Don."

The little lawyer's eyes grew hazy. Home for her meant the Château now. Later? She could not go back again at once to the old life, the artificial life set up for her in the house of Stuart Rhoades. No; could she, young, beautiful and with the crushing weight of her sorrow fresh upon her, never for long, could she endure life in the gorgeous, crowded publicity of the Château Frontenac? What would her home be, and where? And, meanwhile, she wanted Don. It was to him, first of all, that her thought turned. In

all the overturning, all the wreckage of her life-long ties. Don alone stood out, an unchanged, unchanging fact on which she could depend. Fordyce, always reverent towards women, full now of awe of Hilda in her silent anguish, never stopped to think that there might be yet another; that Hilda's passive acquiescence in the fact of his knowledge of the shame and sin which had landed her forthwith in tacit acceptance of his care for her, the very thing betokened a reliance upon him which, in the day to come, might stand beside her present need of him. In fact, just then Fordyce had no wish to look at the future. That would have seemed to him to be a part of self-seeking cad. Besides, the present took all his thought.

He did not speak again. He only moved once, and as he moved he unfolded a great white handkerchief and laid it across Hilda's bare neck and shoulders. She had been shivering a little, he had noticed, and her lace scarf had been left, forgotten on the floor beside the door. And Hilda, drawing the linen close about her, tried her best to nod and thank him in her blithe way, but instead, the tears came fast, and rolled down across the linen and spotting the chiffon underneath.

"Thank you," she said brokenly. "You always think of everything."

The silence once more descended on the carriage, as it trundled slowly under the triumphal arches in Saint John Street, trundled slowly up Fabrique Street Hill towards the blazing electric outlines of Basilica and Seminary, trundled along the boards of dim little Tresor Lane and came into the joyous bedlam of the Ring, a bedlam of gay tourists, and staring habitants, and

roistering sailors from the fleet, a bedlam of noise and colour and confusion, beneath the white-hot glare of thousands of incandescent lights, just such lights, Hilda remembered vaguely, as had glared down on the little room upon whose unfamiliar threshold she had paused, hesitating, wondering what it was that lay before her. And now she knew.

She looked up once more, when the cab went trundling through the arch, and crossed the Château court, still dazzling bright, still thronged with men and women, all in their best array. The carriages were beginning to come back from the ball; they were forced to halt and wait their turn, before they could approach the steps. Then it was that Hilda spoke again, this time a bit more firmly.

"Are you willing to find Don and ask him to come?" she said, with a brave effort at self-control. "Tell him I shall be waiting in my room."

"Of course. I can find him either up at the Parliament Buildings, or else at the Camerons'. But first —" And Fordyce finished out his phrase by flinging one strong, yet strangely impersonal, arm about her waist, and steadying her from her corner of the cab to the top of the steps. "Now then," he added briskly; "let's try the lift, unless it's too crowded. No? And where are your rooms? This way?" And, when he left her, she was holding to the knob of the entrance to the only home she owned, that night, in all her overturned, dismantled world.

Fordyce went away in quest of Don; and Hilda, opening the door, closed it again behind her very swiftly, as if to shut out the mortal agony which had dogged her homeward steps. Then, crossing the room to the

open window, she flung herself down in the chair whose every curve and angle she had learned to know so well, and gave herself up to the agony of question which had refused to be shut out. And the questions one and all began with *Why?* And, as she sought to answer them, she grasped just one insistent fact. The old Hilda Lynde was for ever dead, slain by that midnight scene within the bare white room. What the new Hilda Lynde would be, she could not decide as yet. It takes a little time, after any crash, to determine what fragments of the old shall enter into the making of the new. But there was also Tremaine to be thought of, Bernon Tremaine, her brother. Brother? Brother! She stared about the familiar room with dazed, uncomprehending eyes. Then, twisting her bare arms together on the chair-arm, she bowed her head upon them and began to cry. And, above the low sound of her sobbing, her sobbing for her broken life, her broken love, there arose the foot-beats of the merrymaking throng, still pacing, pacing on the terrace underneath her windows, as if loath to recognize it that another day was dead.

Close behind Fordyce and Hilda, yet unnoticed by them, Tremaine had come down the Hôtel-Dieu steps. Then, fearful lest he overtake the slow-moving cab, he had turned into Charlevoix Street, and gone striding on, careless of where he was, careless almost of the future, so brain-weary, so nerve-racked had he been by the past half-hour. A voice in his ears aroused him to the consciousness that a carriage was halting at the curb beside him, and that Allison Carhart was stepping out, before her own front door.

"Bernon, where in the world did you come from, at this hour?" she had hailed him gayly. The next

instant, her accent changed from gayety to consternation. "You look as if you had seen a ghost," she told him, too shocked at his appearance to think to soften the baldness of her phrase.

"I have," he said briefly. "Good-night."

But she stopped him, with a quiet air of authority which, in his present apathy, he was powerless to oppose.

"Something very bad must have been happening to you, Bernon," she said. "I am sorry, sorry. But no matter about that now. Let's not talk about it. Mother is waiting up for me. She came home quite early, and she said she should have some hot beef tea ready when I came home. You are coming in to have some with me. You need n't stay on after, unless you like." And her strong fingers, closing on his arm, turned him towards the open door.

Inside the drawing-room, Allison flung aside her scarf; and then, her pink gown trailing after her in softly clinging folds, she went away in search of Mrs. Carhart and the tea. When she came back, however, she brought the tray alone.

"Mother is so sorry, Bernon," she said as composedly as if she herself had not constructed certain of the causes of that sorrow; "but she has on a wadded-silk dressing-gown with a hole in the elbow, and she says it is n't decorous to present herself. Moreover, she refuses to array herself, at this hour of the night." And, still chattering, she passed a cup to Tremaine, and took one, herself.

She still kept up her chattering, while she drank her tea, and while Tremaine stirred his. Heedless of her gown, she had thrown herself into an easy chair, and, while she chattered, she sat looking up at him with an

increasing sense that only lately he had been face to face with tragedy, and at its worst. She asked him no questions, however; she merely talked along at random, seeking to fill up the time while he rallied a little of his vanished nerve. She talked about the great review, that morning, about the marching of the Highland regiments, and of the sailors from the American cruiser. She wondered aloud whether the Prince had contracted gout in his right elbow from his incessant making of salutes. Then she wondered what he had thought of the ball, that night, and of Canadian women. And then, without an idea of any possible connection with the look in Tremaine's face, she wondered about Hilda.

"Really," she laughed a little, as she spoke; "it was a most astonishing evasion. She was sitting behind the flags in a window, with Gerry, when Mr. Fordyce — my escort, if you please! — swept down on her with the vaguest possible sort of an excuse, and then swept her off with him. The last thing she did was to assure Gerry that she would be back before long, and, for all I know, the poor, dear man is still sitting glued into his window-seat, awaiting her return. The worst of it is, she made off with my escort, and I had to come home alone. I wonder where in the world she is."

And then she gasped, for, suddenly, baldly and quite without premeditation, Tremaine was telling her.

"Hilda and I are in great trouble, Allison," he made brief preface.

Then he told her all the truth.

All his life, Tremaine had trusted Allison, had relied upon her steady, comprehending friendship. Now, however, he flung the burden of his trouble down before

her, not for his own sake only; but for the sake of Hilda, his old-time love for whom had lost nothing by reason of its gain in protecting tenderness. Unclaimed, she yet was his now, his to guard, to shield from all the world outside. Allison could help him do this. She knew Hilda, loved her dearly; by that love she, another woman, could understand her even in her agony, could come far closer to her than any man, whatever his protecting tenderness, would dare to try to do.

And Allison, true to the womanly instinct which had helped to win for her his present confidence, listened in silence to the very end. The end, briefly as he told his story, was long in coming, long and hard; but, heedless of the effort it was costing her, she met it, dry-eyed, steady, even a little smiling.

"I am sorry," she said then. "But you knew all about that, long before now, Bernon. What can I do to help?"

He stared back at her in a helpless bewilderment which seemed the natural outcome of the apathy that had been settling down upon him during his recital.

"Allison, I don't know," he told her slowly. "I wish I did. Don't you?"

But, even in his appeal, his voice broke. With his last remaining bit of steadiness, he set down his untasted cup. Then, crossing the room, he flung his arm along the corner of the mantel, and buried his face even from her loyal eyes.

Again Allison waited silently, until at last she realized that the sight of his grief was fast shaking her own self-control. Fearful of what might happen then, she rose and, crossing the room, rested her hand upon his sleeve.

"Bernon," she told him quietly; "if I am to be of

any real use, there are a few things still that I would better know. Please come and sit down, and tell me about them."

Yielding to her level voice, her compelling touch, he lifted his head and looked at her for a moment, staring with dull, lack-lustre eyes at her strong, quiet self, at her trailing, clinging folds of pale pink crape. Then he followed her back across the room and sat down on the sofa at her side, a spectre of his former self, haggard and aged and wan. It is thus, in its unaccustomed coming to them, that grief uses men, roughly, and leaving deep-cut finger marks which later joys are powerless to obliterate.

"What is it that you need to know?" he asked her.

She shut her hands tightly in her silken lap.

"First of all, how long have you known this thing; you, yourself?" she questioned steadily.

"Always," he answered harshly. Then he controlled himself. "Forgive me, Allison," he said, in swift contrition. "We men are always brutes; in times like this, the brutishness crops out. How long have I known it? It is hard to tell. You see, it came to me by bits."

"You have known some of it for a long, long time," she said, and now there was no trace of question in her tone.

"Yes," he assented. "As far back as I can remember, I knew there was something strange about me. Even in our kindergarten songs, the others all had people who stood for the names of things we sang about. I did n't have anybody. By and by, when I went to their houses, I found out that they all had whole rows of families, from fathers and mothers out to tenth

cousins once removed; and I had n't anybody. It was about that time, I think, that I began to notice that all the mothers, yours, and Mrs. Gerrans, and the rest, all treated me a little better than they did the rest of you, all acted as if they were trying to make up to me for something I had lost. I used to wonder about it. At last, one day, I decided what it all meant. I had n't any family of my own, and they were trying to make up for it to me."

Beneath the spell of these long-gone memories, dragged out from under all that had since been piled upon them, his face was regaining something of its stillness, his eyes a little of their life.

"And then?" Allison prompted him gently.

"That was all, up to the time when I went away to college. The morning before I started off — I was going with Gerrans, the next noon — I had a telephone from the Hôtel-Dieu. I was to go there without fail, that afternoon at two, and go into the parlour and wait, after I had sent the porter for Sister St. Saba. I hated going; I had some other plan on foot, that afternoon. Still, the mystery of it all attracted me, and I went. I had been told I must keep my going a secret, you know; and boys do love a secret," he added, in apology. "Well, I went. To my dying day, I never shall forget the look of the place, nor the smell, the smell of bareness and scrubbed floors and, away off and faint, of disinfectants." It was plain to Allison that a little of the nervous strain was relaxing with these slow-told details. "And then I sat and waited in the parlour, till the wicket opened, and I saw the nun behind it. I had just time to think that she was very pretty, and that her eyes were yellow ones, like mine; and then, a

minute later, I knew the truth, knew that she was my mother."

"She told you then? As suddenly as that? You poor little boy!"

He smiled sadly, less at her tone than at the thought her words called up.

"Not a little boy any longer, Allison. My boyhood and I parted company there and then. It happens so, sometimes. She told me; but she did n't tell me nearly all, only that she was my mother, that she had been the woman who had pretended to be my nurse, the woman who had disappeared, and that, even if she was a nun, she loved me dearly. And I think she did."

"And your father?" Allison asked him, after a short pause.

He disregarded her question. Instead, —

"Allison, it was after that day in the parlour that I began to know how good you were to me. You always have been. I knew I must be a trial to you, when I came here, glum and dumb, and sat beside the fire. It was the only bit of home I knew. I had n't the courage to stay away, when the black days came. I fought against them, though. I tried to tell myself it did n't make any difference. But I could n't get used to the idea that such a stain —" in his reliance on her steady friendship, he saw no need to modify his words; "such a stain could rest on me, when I had done nothing to deserve it. I fought against it, all I could. But I was n't always able to come out on top. I dared not give in; once I acknowledged I was down, I knew that I would be done for. I could only shut my teeth and keep very, very still. Those were the times I used to come to you. God knows what would have become

of me without you, Allison! And I could n't even tell you why I needed you. She had tied me down with promises too tight for that."

He sat there for a little, brooding in his old, old way. Then he raised his head.

"It's queer to be telling you all this, Allison, you a girl. But you are n't like any other girl I ever knew; you're large enough to realize that, to-night, if I had n't talked, I should have gone mad. My father? I never knew anything about him, until he told me."

"Told you? Where? When?" For the instant, Allison had cast discretion to the winds. "He told you?" she repeated, her surprise too great to be repressed.

"Told me here in Quebec, five months ago."

"Five months?" she counted swiftly. "Hilda and Don must have been here then."

"They were."

"What did they think was the reason of his coming up here?"

"They never knew. He crossed from the Mediterranean, where he was supposed to be cruising for his health, came over here to spend twenty hours in Levis. Then he went back again. He sent me word to meet him, and we had a stormy time. Before he told me the truth, he dared," Tremaine's tone hardened; "dared try to buy me to go away from here, away to the Philippines. I gave him his answer; and then I made him tell his reasons. Afterwards — I was too indignant at the time to do much thinking — I wondered why he was in such a state of mind because I was going to be good friends with Don. I know now it was on account of Hilda."

"You did n't know it then?"

Tremaine shook his head at his clasped hands, loosely dangling between his knees.

"He told me that he was my unacknowledged father. For Don's sake, I agreed to his condition that I should keep the secret. And then — Allison, you know how I loved her, even then! — I asked him about Hilda. He looked me in the eye and declared to me that she was no real relation to him, only a child he had adopted." And Tremaine thrust his hands into his pockets, rose and began to pace the floor.

It was a moment before he dared to trust his voice. Then, without another halt, he went on to the end.

"I loved Hilda, as you know. I do love her more than ever, even if it's not in the way I dreamed —" he swallowed hard; "dreamed of doing. At last, I must have showed to my mother that I loved her. You know she had seen Hilda once, when I was in the hospital. Think of her self-control, that day! And then, one day when we were on the Ramparts, outside that little, low, grated window in the wall, I saw her looking out at us. Next day, she told me, warned me; but she insisted that I was bound by the promises which she had given my father, insisted that Hilda never must be told. She was quite steady then; but, after I had gone they found her lying unconscious on the floor. Since then, she never has been herself. Yesterday noon, she called the Mother Superior into her cell and told her all the truth: how she had entered the community under false pretences; how her vows had all been based upon a lie. You know the demands they make of novices? She had — had not answered to them truly. But, at last, tired of her sin and her deceptions, she told the truth fully and exactly as it all

had happen. And, the truth confessed and the absolution given, she fell on the floor again, unconscious. It was her old trouble; and, this time, it was the end. The Mother Superior sent for me; and, as soon as she was conscious, I went for Hilda."

"And where is Hilda now?" Allison asked, after a little while.

"At the Château, I suppose. Fordyce took her. Allison, that man — But I can't ever tell you what he has been to me, all these months. He was the only man into whose care I would have dared put Hilda, on such a night as this. The only man —" He checked himself abruptly.

"Bernon," Allison's voice was full of quiet strength; "what is it now that I can do best for you and Hilda?"

Pausing in his restless pacing, he faced about and stood looking down at her, a world of sadness in his heavy eyes.

"Find out when Hilda needs me, Allison, and let me know," he told her briefly. "Some day, that time will come; but it's too soon yet. She needs a while to get used to — to the new idea. When the time does come, I want her; until then, though, I'd best keep quite away." He hesitated. Then, with a sudden gesture, he threw out his hands as if to cast aside their shackles; and a new note of jubilation rang above the sadness in his voice. "And then at last I can go to claim my sister!" he added.

But, only a moment later, the strained nerves snapped, and he sank down into the nearest chair, shaken from head to heel with long, dry, almost soundless sobs.

And Hilda, meanwhile, was crying softly in Don's strong and protecting arms.

He had come to her sitting-room, his step alert, his eyes lighted with the certainty of Ethel's newly confessed love. Fordyce had told him no particulars; merely that Hilda was not quite well, and was waiting up to see him, when he came. Don, absorbed in Ethel, had had no attention to spare for the way in which Fordyce had bundled him into the waiting cab. His mind still upon Ethel and himself, he had called back a cheery good night to Fordyce, as the cab drove off; then, scorning the lift, he had gone running up the stairs to knock on Hilda's door, then throw it open and stand, a picture of hearty, happy, luxurious youth, upon the threshold. Hilda in tears, her hair disarranged and her elaborate gown crushed about her in the chair! Don had never provisioned such a sight as that. His voice showed his concern.

"Hilda, old girl! What's the rumpus?" he demanded; but the careless words were given meaning by his quick stride across the room, by his outstretched, loving arms.

And in those arms which seemed, to-night, to Hilda the one place she dared call her very own, she told him, bit by bit, the dreary, sodden story, new, but already seeming to her older than the river underneath her windows, told him while, bit by bit, the clasping arms about her grew tenderer, more loving.

Don listened to her in silence. The while he listened and held her closer, closer, incredulity and disgust, conviction and bitter disappointment, one after the other, were written on his face, a face which, all at once, had turned from happy boyhood into rugged manhood.

"My poor little sister Hilda!" he said at last, and

he buried his face in her hair, and sat there silent, thinking.

When at last he raised his head, his chin had stiffened, hardened with determination; but his blue eyes were gentle, compassionate.

"Poor old Dad!" he muttered slowly. "Just think of the thousand hells he must have suffered!"

silent,

d stif-
blue

think

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

SOMEWHERE, in immeasurable space, Sister St. Saba's shriven soul was exulting in its final freedom from all taint of sin. Her body, worn and tired with the months-long strife, was resting quietly at last in the dim chamber of death where two women knelt beside her. At her head two candles flickered; at her feet rested the basin of holy water, and the room was very silent, save for the faintly murmured psalter of the dead.

The struggle had been a hard one, and a long; but at length the soul had won its freedom. The foes had been insidious, persistent. The cloister can have its own secret ambitions, its own hopes of preferment, no less surely than does the world outside. It had been no slight victory: the throwing aside of false ambitions just as their fruits were almost in her grasp; the yielding her high place among them all, their respect and even their love; the revealing to them one and all the hideous deception of her falsely taken vows. The conditions of her acceptance among them included a spotless record. And she had allowed them to believe that she had been spotless, unstained by the world. Almost to the very last, she had gripped her secret passionately. Her partial confession to her son had been walled around with promises that he would not betray any of the facts

she told him, not for the sake of Hilda, as she had pretended, but lest in some way they should reach the ears of her Superior. Thus had she compromised it with her conscience. But her conscience, stronger than her will, had refused to be satisfied with half-measures such as those. Bit by bit, in the weeks that had come after, weeks of increasing weakness and weariness, she had been brought to see that peace for her could lie only in a full confession. The holy lives of the sisters who had gone before her, the self-denial and the purity of those sisters now about her, her belief, not in the glorious hereafter, but in the need of a stainless present: all these things, bit by bit, had forced her slowly, gently, but irrevocably towards the hour for her confession. It was the final struggle between her own selfish wish for personal place among them, and her greater, far more selfless desire to leave unstained the record of their ancient sisterhood. The selflessness had triumphed. Early in the morning of the day before, tranquil, serene and full of hope for a long, useful life still before her, she had sought out her confessor. An hour later, she had gone to the Superior, had fallen on her knees beside her, and never had arisen.

And now the strife was over, and the battle won. Beneath her veil and framed about with spotless linen, Sister St. Saba's face was full of happy peace. Above her fresh, uncreased white rochet, her hands, whiter far than their sleeves of creamy serge, were clasped upon the holy emblem of her faith. There she would lie, resting, until, borne by her sisters, preceded by the long procession of white-robed nuns with lowered veils and with candles burning in their hands, she would

pass along the well-known cloisters to be laid to sleep among those other nuns in loyalty to whose honour she had yielded up her fatal secret. Sinned against, but more greatly a sinner, her soul was purified by her own self-sought penance.

It was past noon, that day, when Tremaine at last went up the familiar gray-stone steps and halted in the well-known vestibule. There had been nothing he could do for Sister St. Saba. No worldly hands could touch her now. And he had many, many things to do for himself. First of all, he must set his house in order.

Strange to say, in all those weeks that he had known the truth concerning Hilda, it had never once occurred to him to try to forecast the future. Himself forbidden to speak out the truth, he had supposed that the present state of things would go on for ever. Now that the change had come, with a clairvoyant swiftness, he saw its consequences to all sorts of remotest ends. That his later love for Hilda was stronger, tenderer by far than it had been before he knew the truth, he recognized past all gainsaying. That Hilda had loved him dearly he also knew. What he did not know, what no man could ever know concerning any woman, was what would be the effect upon her of this sudden, astounding revelation of the ties between them. Would she be able to remould her love to this new form? Would her old love, perforce destroyed, yield to dislike, aversion? Would she, in short, love him as the brother that he was, tolerate him as a companion forced upon her, or hate him as a sharer in the great deceit which had come near to wrecking her girlish life? Indeed, had it not already wrecked it? What would her life in future be, the unacknowledged daugh-

ter in her father's home, surrounded by every gift but one, and that one truth? Bright, brave, careless girl that she was, how could she go through the strain that was awaiting her, the strain of adapting her frank self to her own share in keeping up the secret? That she would keep it up, Tremaine felt singularly little question. As far as the world at large was concerned, it was still quite safe. Fordyce and Ethel Cameron, Allison and Gerrans, the only ones who knew, would guard it well. As for the doctor, he was a lay confessor; many a secret was for ever buried in his wise old brain.

Hilda would go back to New York, would take up her life there, as if nothing at all had happened to mar the frolic of her summer holiday. It would go against her grain to do it; but there was nothing else she could do, nothing else open to any girl, brought up to luxury, without profession and with not a relative in the world outside that home. Unless — He checked the thought abruptly.

And there was always Don, always more a brother than a cousin. And later, a good deal later, he hoped there might be Fordyce. This hope was not a new one. It had been growing up in him, side by side with the tender new affection which had replaced his older, headstrong love. In measure as he had stepped down from his old place, he had sought to put Fordyce there in his stead. Fordyce was a man, gentle, very tender, but very strong. And he loved Hilda.

If Hilda ever did come to love Fordyce, Quebec would doubtless be their common home. It was on that account that Tremaine felt he must set his house in order, swiftly and with exceeding thoroughness. The next few days would tell him once for all whether

he was to be the object of Hilda's aversion, or of her love. If it were to be aversion, then he would go away out of Quebec for ever. If he went now, there need be no question of his motives. Later, when, as he felt might come to pass, Hilda returned to make her home in the city, gossip would surely spring up upon the heels of his departure.

That he owed to Hilda the sacrifice involved in his going away, Tremaine felt no doubt at all. Owed, it was a debt he was glad to pay. How else could he make good to her for his share in the general deception? Bitter as had been his own experience in having the truth revealed to him by bits, in growing up face to face with the fact that Fate had marked him off from all men by the circumstances of his birth; hers, he felt, was far more bitter in that, without an instant's preparation, her house of cards had been thrown down upon her head. Poor little Hilda! Lonely and dazed, her old ties shattered, her new ones still to make, she was grieving somewhere now. He longed to go to her, to gather her up in his arms and comfort her and carry her away to safety from worry and sorrow. Nevertheless, he remained true to the belief he had expressed to Allison, the night before, or, rather, that same morning. It was from Hilda now that the first sign must come. Meanwhile, it was his duty to set his house in order so that, if the sign were ever so little hostile, he might move out at once.

He spent the morning, then, finishing up arrears of work, writing a note or two, and sorting over papers. Towards noon, he paused for a moment and leaned back in his chair, his eyes upon the wall above his desk. Between him and the paper in his hand had come a

sudden picture: an ice-locked river bordered with hills of dusky blue, a flying horse, an empty sleigh and a tangled heap of rugs, one corner of which he had lifted to disclose a scarlet toque, a gay girl face with dimpling cheeks and mocking pale brown eyes, eyes that, save in expression, were the exact counterpart of the grave eyes staring down upon her. Hilda as he had seen her first: plucky and irresponsible! The past few months had cured her of her irresponsibility; the last of it might well have died, the night before. The pluck, though, had remained. Once on a time, he had advised her to hold intact its record, that she might have it to support her courage in her time of need. And she had taken his advice; how well no one else knew as did he whose eyes had never left her during that half-hour vigil of the night before. It was long before his gaze fell backward, to rest upon the paper in his hands.

Soon after one o'clock, he left his office, and went up Mountain Hill. So absorbed had he been in his own reflections that he had been stone deaf to the joyous clamour which had risen to his open windows; and now he realized with a start that this Saturday was the high tide of the festival. He watched it with a curious feeling of remoteness, as if the gorgeous throng were out of an alien race; he passed among them like a ghost, unnoticed by any but a few. Those few paused a moment to look after him, and wonder what he did to hold himself so markedly aloof from the prevailing spirit of good cheer. Then the prevailing spirit once more fell upon them, and they straightway forgot the solitary passer-by, with the lowered eyes and the air of complete detachment from all that made the day for them.

And Tremaine passed on up Mountain Hill, under the great triumphal arches and the floating, flaunting banners, turned into the comparative loneliness of the Grand Battery, passed on around the Ramparts until, bethinking himself of the low, grated window in the wall and of all that it had opened out upon his life, he retraced his steps and followed Charlevoix Street until he came to the Hôtel-Dieu.

The porter at the door was noncommittal. She admitted gravely that Sister St. Saba had died, the night before; but that was the sum total of her admissions. She scarcely thought it likely that any one could go to say a prayer beside her. It was not the rule of the order to allow it. The nuns would say the prayers, would even say a prayer for him, if so he chose to wish. About his going in: she could send to ask the Mother Superior. But she was sure it was of no use, no use at all. The rules were very strict. When was the burial to be? She searched her mind for an instant; then she shook her head. Really, she could not say.

Only a moment later, Tremaine had turned away and closed the heavy door behind him, closed it, too, upon that chapter of his life. He was going out from the Hôtel-Dieu, never to return.

In the vestibule, he barely escaped collision with another man, entering on the same errand as he himself had done, a man whose bowed white head was covered with a bushy thatch of hair, whose face, aforetime ruddy, was mottled now and lined. Their eyes met, on the one side furtively, on the other with steady, level scrutiny. Then they passed on their separate ways, and without a sign of recognition.

Slowly and by unfrequented turnings, Tremaine

went back to his office, by narrow Ferland, and Couillard, and shabby Hébert. He felt he had no place within the gala throng, that day, he who had just been deemed unworthy to kneel and say a final prayer at his dead mother's side. Nun though she had been, cloistered and remote from all that made his life, she yet had been his mother. She had loved him, watched over him, even from afar; had paved the path before him ere she left him, had guarded jealously his secret, seeking to keep from him any smirch of shame. And, now that she was dead, the rules of the order forbade his paying her the last outward signs of the love he had borne her. Inside his pockets, his fists shut until the nails bit into the palms. Never before had he felt so desolate, so bereft of any human tie.

As he passed the Carharts' home, he glanced up at the open windows, and his step lagged. Then it quickened. After their vigil of the night before, Allison would need all the rest she could get, before dressing for the gala pageants which, he suddenly remembered, were to come off at five, that afternoon. And Hilda had been counting on them, climax of all the pleasures which had gone before. Poor little Hilda!

His jaws set and his fists still clinched inside his pockets, he came around the Battery to Mountain Hill. The throng had increased fast during his short absence, and the tide was setting sharply up the hill. He set himself against it just as sharply, and ploughed his way through it all: tourists and soldiers, pageanters and sailors from the fleet, all bound on the one errand from which he alone had turned his face. What part had pageants in his life, a life decreed by Fate to be more fantastic by far than any pageant? His jaws shut

harder, and he pushed his way down through the crowd more swiftly, longing to escape into some place of quiet, realizing all the time that this present struggle was, in a sense, epitome of his life. What was it Hilda used to quote?

"Defying death,
And all unconsciously shape every act
And bend each wandering step to this one end —"

Poor little Hilda! Would she feel now that she had done it? His fists shut more tightly still, as he turned in at the familiar doorway at the foot of Mountain Hill, and climbed the stairs that led up to his office.

He had left his office in charge of the janitor, with instructions to say that he would be back at four. It was now but half-past two. Nevertheless, he found the janitor gone, and Don in full possession, awaiting his return.

At the sound of his feet upon the stairs, Don lowered his heels from the desk, lowered, too, the morning paper with which he had been seeking to pass the time.

"I was getting frightened about you, Tremaine," he said, as casually as if nothing at all unusual had occurred. "I need n't, though; you always did have a trick of walking out, in office hours. Where have you been, all morning?"

"Here." Tremaine hung up his hat.

"The deuce you have!" Don's tone was still entirely nonchalant, belying the shadows that lay beneath his eyes. "Then why the mischief did n't you answer the telephone?"

"I -- I -- Honestly, Don, I did n't hear it ring,"

Tremaine confessed. "Did you call me up? I'm sorry."

"I did n't call." Don still held stoutly to his air of cheery unconcern. "'T was Hilda."

"Hilda!" Tremaine grew a shade more colourless, as he spoke her name.

"Yes. She called you up, a couple of times. Once was at half-past ten, just as we came out from breakfast. Once was at twelve."

"I am sorry," Tremaine repeated automatically, his brain busy with all the possible interpretations of Don's news. "I did n't hear her at all. She wants — ?" He left the question in suspension.

"You, of course," Don told him bluntly. "Most girls do want their brothers, once they find they have any. Come out of your trance, man, and turn to flesh and blood," he went on kindly. "Tremaine, there's no sense in our trying to dodge the issue, no use in beating about the bush. You and I are brothers. Hilda is our sister. What's more, in a time like this, we must do our level best to hang together. Else, we'll go under utterly."

It was a new Donald Rhodes who spoke, a Don born of the night before, steady and true and very, very strong. Now, without rising from his chair, he held out his hand to Tremaine, and their fingers shut in a long, hard clasp.

"How is Hilda?" Tremaine asked, after a short hush had come between them.

Don's face changed.

"Poor old girl! She's all afloat, to-day; all broken up and wretched."

"Not ill?"

Don shook his head.

"Worse. She is perfectly steady, perfectly cool and quiet. She thinks of everything, plans everything, goes on, just as she always has done. Since I first came in, last night, and found her in her room, she has n't cried a tear. It's bound to come, though; and it's bound to be just so much the worse, for every hour she puts it off. Meanwhile, she's plucky, plucky. She takes it all in, too, all the hash it has made of her entire life. She went to work at once to pick up the pieces and see how they best could be patched together. That," Don's voice broke a very little; "that is Hilda."

"Yes," Tremaine assented thickly. "That is Hilda."

Once more the hush came in between them. Once more Tremaine broke it with a question.

"Shall I go up with you now, Don?"

Don frowned in thoughtful silence.

"Tremaine, I don't know what to tell you," he said at last, in a sudden wave of desperation. "Hilda wants you; she ought to have you, just as soon as you can get there. No. Wait." Again there came the new decision in his tone. "There are all sorts of practical things that stand in the way, things that we two men are bound to face. We are n't sure yet, I take it, just how and when this story will be announced. That we shall announce it, of course, goes without saying. Till we do, though, we don't want to set tongues to wagging. That Château is a howling bedlam, crammed with people, and every mother's son of them agog for a sensation. There are people we know there, too, people from home. Till we decide to tell our story, Hilda can't well see you in her room. She must n't see

you under the eyes of that mob. Even if she did n't go to pieces, as she's morally bound to do, the strain on her would be more than she ought to have just now. And yet, quite naturally, she wants to see you. Hang it all! What can we do about it, anyhow?" And Don started to his feet and began tramping up and down the office floor.

Tremaine sat still and watched him, too anxiously intent upon an answer to his question to seek to forecast the outcome of the talk with Hilda. That would come later, come with a second wave of intent anxiety which would turn him sick and faint. Now, however, his mind was on the other, lesser matter, and it was of this only that, at last, he spoke.

"I think, perhaps, at the Carharts' —"

Don interrupted, and in eager haste.

"You think they would n't mind? I'll ask Allison about it, then. If it's all right, I'll take Hilda over there, directly after dinner. And you'll be early; won't you? It's best not to keep her waiting. I'll go across there now; it's not the kind of thing one really cares to telephone."

He started for the door. Then he hesitated, halted and turned back again. Some sudden instinct made him snatch off his cap with one hand, while he held the other out to Tremaine.

"Tremaine. No, hang it, Bernon!" he blurted out. "It's going to be all right between the two of us, I hope. You know I cared about you, from the very first, last fall. I've always wished I had a brother, too, you know. About the rest of it," he shut his teeth for a moment, then went on more quickly; "of course, in a sort of way, a fellow is bound to be loyal to his

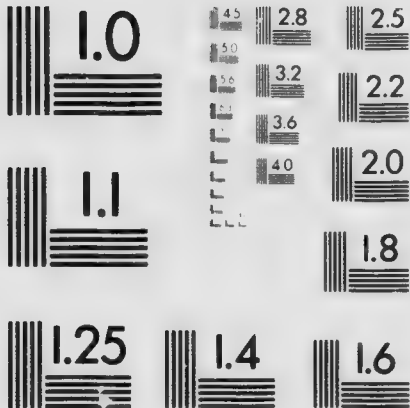
father, whatever comes; but I'll be hanged if any amount of loyalty shall ever make me stand for this!"

And his hand crumpled Tremaine's fingers in a nervous clasp while, for an instant, the blue eyes and the amber ones met in a look of complete understanding. Then Don dropped Tremaine's hand, and turned away.



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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

"DON," Fordyce said to him, a half-hour later; "Ethel and I have been talking about this, all the morning. We thought about it, pretty much all night. I know you love Ethel. You know I love your — sister. And Ethel and I, both of us, want you to be sure that none of this present mess is making any difference."

And, with this assurance ringing in his ears, Donald Rhodes had gone on his way up Louis Street to meet his father.

Don had come back from his brief call on Allison Carhart, to find at the Château office a messenger from the Saint Louis, farther up the street. He was just in time to hear the messenger ask for him, to see in his hand a note in his father's writing. Without pausing to wonder how his father chanced to be in the city, he took the note and tore it open. Then, just stopping long enough to telephone to Hilda in her room that he had seen Allison and that everything was all right, and that he had been called out upon a sudden errand, he left the Château and went striding up the street.

The past few hours had made him ready to accept anything, now, quite as a matter of course, even the appearing of his father. Nevertheless, his father's note showed he knew all that had been happening at

the Hôtel-Dieu, knew that his secret was no longer in his own hands. The coming interview, whatever might prove to be its nature, was bound to be a hard one for them both, for Don especially. The past sixteen hours had totally reversed all his old blind adoration for his father. He had trusted him implicitly, had endowed him with all the virtues which should, by rights, have underlain the genial charm of manner. And now, all at once, he had found that manner to be but the merest hollow shell, or else a tawdry cover to the evil things beneath. It takes much more than twenty hours to annul the gathered-up affection of a lifetime. Twenty seconds had sufficed to destroy confidence, especially when those twenty seconds had revealed a sin which, of itself, was loathly in the eyes of Donald Rhodes. He would always, till the end of time, love his father — but with a difference. And the old comradeship between them was for ever dead.

His own irresponsible boyishness was also dead for ever. He realized that, himself, realized it with bitterness. It would no longer be possible for him to drift on in the old way, spoiled child in the home, favoured figurehead in an office made for him, an office to which he could come and go whenever the mood was on him, sure that, coming or going, his absurdly large salary would still be paid over to him promptly on the first of every month. Up to now, he had played along through life, amusing himself with whatever came, even with his nominal business interests. To his father, he had been everything; to the world at large, he had counted for no more than he had done, the day he left his kindergarten to take his place in school. However, that was over now and past. He squared his shoulders at the

thought. The time had come for him to take a man's place in the world, self-reliant, self-respecting, even self-supporting. His step became steadier and more rhythmic, and he raised his head. As he did so, his eyes fell upon Fordyce, coming to meet him with an outstretched hand.

He went on, after leaving Fordyce, with still better courage. Even if one's own world went a bit rotten at the core, there were always other worlds to be considered and, in time, to be annexed. Meanwhile, another dozen steps, and he had turned in at the ugly yellow cube of the Saint Louis.

Mr. Stuart Rhodes was in his room. Was this Mr. Donald Rhodes? He was to be shown the way up there at once. And, without more ado, Don found himself following a bell-boy to the lift.

His father's voice, answering the knock, lacked resonance. Don dismissed the boy before he touched the knob of the closed door. Then, gathering together all his courage, he turned the knob, opened the door, walked in. In some vague and instinctive fashion, he had looked to see his father changed. In all the wreckage of his own mental world, it seemed to Don incredible that there should not be some outward mark upon the man who had brought to pass the ruin, as well as upon the rest of them, the victims. To his extreme surprise, his father greeted him with easy nonchalance, with the old genial affection which still sought to maintain its charm. Don halted in a sudden agony of self-rebuke. Had it all been a false and empty story, a bit of sensational delusion hatched up in the deranged nerve-centres of a dying nun? Had all his distrust of the man before him been misplaced? Could he replace his

father on his former pedestal? The dizzying joy of the mere possibility told Don once and for all how keen had been his mourning for his fallen idol.

But his father's words dismissed the possibility almost upon the instant of its appearing.

"My poor old Don!" he said, with a tenderness but rarely used from man to man. "I'm sorry. I wish that you, at least, might have been spared, even if the others knew."

At the words, Don stiffened. Why, he could not have told; and yet, something in the unspoken caress antagonized him.

"Why spare me?" he asked steadily.

"Because you, anyway, are not to blame."

"Neither are Bernon and Hilda," Don flashed back upon him hotly.

A world of bitterness rang in the reply of Stuart Rhodes.

"By inheritance, yes."

"Father!" Don said still more hotly, and, at the unaccustomed word, both the men knew that the old, loving name had passed away for ever from the lips of Donald Rhodes. Then he controlled himself. "How came you here?" he asked more quietly.

"Tremaine wired me, yesterday."

"Tremaine?"

"Yes, at noon, as soon as the doctor said there was n't any chance for her to rally." To cover his own embarrassment at his palpable dodging of the name, Stuart Rhodes felt in his pocket for his cigars. "Don," he said, when the cigar was lighted; "I'm confoundedly sorry for you in this thing. In a way, it comes hardest of all on you. Your mother has known it, ever

since Hilda was a little baby. I can see it must have been a shock to you, though. Still, as far as the practical end of it goes, it won't make any difference, even now the truth is out. I had my lawyers look out for that, years and years ago "

Don raised his head impatiently, his blue eyes blazing with wrath, but his lips twitching with the hurt to his pride. Did his father think that was the reason he cared, think that he stopped, in such a time as this, to wonder what would be the effect upon his inheritance? Nothing that had gone before was half so bad as to be considered such a cad as that.

But Stuart Rhodes was still speaking, his eyes upon the smoke that curled about his face.

"I was over at the Hôtel-Dieu just now. It was the decent thing for me to do; but, of course, they would n't let me see her. To-night, I shall try to have a talk with Tremaine. Once for all, I want to settle up things with him. Now, the question is — Of course, you can see that Hilda won't care to stay on here. Do you think she can be ready to get off with me, on Monday?"

The absolute unconcern of the question drove Don almost to frenzy. After the night and morning he and Hilda had spent together, discussing all the phases of this new-old tragedy, seeking to forecast the change it could not fail to make in both their lives, it was incredible to him that his father could sit there, calmly smoking, while he asked if Hilda would be ready to get off with him on Monday.

"Get off!" he repeated blankly.

"Yes. She'd best go down with me, I think." Stuart Rhodes bent forward to break the ash from his cigar, then flicked a crumb of ash from his gray-tweed

knee. "Poor little girl! I shall have to look out for her a little bit, until she's over the shock of it. It's a good thing we're ready to sail, next week. The change will take up her mind, take it off herself a little. How is the girl? Feeling rather forlorn?"

Don tightened the curb he had placed upon himself. Bit by bit he was realizing that it would do no especial good to say out to his father the things that were surging, seething in his mind. Morally, the two men spoke in different tongues. Without the aid of an interpreter, they never, never could come to any sort of understanding, even if they went on talking till the world's remotest end.

Stuart Rhodes interpreted the little silence as reluctance to sting him with an unwelcome bit of detail.

"Poor little Hilda!" he iterated. "Then she really is broken up about this thing?"

"Naturally." In spite of his efforts to the contrary, Don's tone was very dry.

His father half rose from his comfortable chair beside the open window.

"I suppose I'd best go over to see her?" he suggested.

Don looked across at him steadily, spoke steadily.

"I doubt if Hilda would feel like seeing you — yet."

Stuart Rhodes sank back in his chair.

"A little later, then. It will be better all round; it's infernally hot now. I might stop in to see her, on my way down to look up Tremaine."

How argue with this cheery nonchalance, Don demanded of himself. The first moment of their greeting had been bound to be embarrassing. Once it was over, though, his father spoke with all his old, genial ease of manner, all his happy faculty of putting worries

and cares behind him. It was plain that he had been both sorry and annoyed by the exposure of his long-kept secret, plain, too, that never once had the idea crossed his mind that the exposure must be a more or less public one. He took it quite for granted that the whole affair would be hushed up; that Tremaine would be grateful to receive some sort of a pension; that Hilda would come back again to him on in the same old way. He took all this for granted with such smooth unconcern that Don almost questioned whether it would be right to undeceive him. And Don, hearing the news the night before, had spoken pityingly of the thousand hells his father must have suffered. He was too young to realize that, in the deepest hell of all, suffering is replaced by apathy, an apathy which would remain unbroken within the portals of high heaven.

Even aside from the futility of argument, there were other things to hold Don silent. In spite of everything, this man was his father, and so entitled to an outward showing of respect. He was older, too, a man of riper years, of wider experience in life, as the world sees fit to call it. And he, Don, was a mere boy, with a boy's downright, uncompromising point of view, intolerant, perhaps a little bit lacking in charity. And, after all, the matter lay between Hilda and his father. Had he any right to interfere? He took a dozen turns up and down the room, pondering the question. When he halted and looked up, his father, meeting the blue eyes, was astounded at the change which had come to them.

"Father," Don spoke slowly, weighing each word with care; "we may as well face this thing out to the end, even if the end is bound to be bitter to us both.

Hilda and I have had our world knocked into scraps. I am not sure, either, which one of us has had the worst of it. The shame rests upon her birth, of course; but it's a shame of which she's innocent. She did no sin; as far as I can keep them from her, she shall never have to take the consequences. For me," his voice failed him; then it steadied; "it's a hard thing to stand by and watch your hero proved to have been — Well, no matter. But you know, you must have known, just what you always stood for in my life. I know you are my father, and I have no right to judge you; but — I never could have been quite such chums with you, if I'd known about this thing. Perhaps it's just as well I did n't know. At least, I've had so much out of life."

Once more he fell to pacing the floor, his eyes upon the gaudy, rather threadbare, pattern of the carpet. Once more, a little later, he halted and looked up.

"Now about the future," he said, with a bravery which gave no hint of what each slow, deliberate word was costing him. "It does n't take long to decide things, some things. Of course, Hilda and I had no idea that you would hear of this at present. In fact, we did n't feel that mattered, one way or the other, very much. But we talked our plans over, this morning. For the present, we neither one of us feel we can go back to New York. No," he checked his father's attempt to speak; "nor go to Europe, either. First of all, she must have time to get used to this thing, to steady down to it a little. We both think that it will be best for her to stay on here, either in the city, or near it, where she can be quiet. She has some good friends

here. If need be, they will take her in till autumn. By that time, she will be able to decide what she wishes to do next."

After his own selfish fashion, Stuart Rhodes loved Hilda, and Don's words hurt. He tried to smile; but the attempt ended in a dismal failure. He sought to dismiss the failure beneath an unwonted harshness.

"By that time, she probably will be glad enough to come home and behave like a sane being," he said, with a curtness which scarcely veiled his real hurt at the unexpected turn the talk was taking.

Don understood and pitied. None the less, he felt that Hilda now was the one to be considered, not his father; and he knew that Hilda was in no condition to meet her father's calm assumption that the past was dead and buried, ready to be forgotten.

"I doubt her ever going back to live with you again," he said.

"Nonsense!" Stuart Rhodes blustered. But he read no signs of nonsense in the steady blue eyes that faced him, and he fell silent, seeking to digest their tacit message as well as he was able. "What are your own plans, Don?" he asked at length, with a gentleness which brought the first tremor to Don's lips.

"I shall stay near Hilda for the present. She seems to want me. While she does, I shall stay on."

There was finality in words and voice. Stuart Rhodes felt that protests would be futile.

"You think, then, I'd best not urge her to go home with me?" he questioned.

"I think it would be best that she should never know you've been here," Don answered.

"Perhaps. It may make it easier to pick up things,

later on," the older man said slowly; and Don, listening, lacked the courage to assure him that, for Hilda, there would never be a *later on*.

Instead, he turned and started for the door. Half way across the floor, however, he paused, then turned back again, his hand extended.

"Father," he said; "I'm sorry this has come between us. You've always stood on the very top of things for me. I shall always care a lot about you; but, as far as the rest of it goes, I shall have to get used to things a little, as well as Hilda."

Before his direct eyes, those of his father drooped and dimmed. Then he cleared his throat.

"I'm sorry, Don," he said. "Of course, I made a big mistake; but it was all so long ago, I hoped you would n't take it too hard. I don't blame you for being upset; but remember how my world is bound up in you, and don't let it separate us any more than you can help."

Their hands fell apart. Don turned to go away. His father's voice, steadier now, went after him.

"And, of course, you and Hilda will get your allowance sent on here, as usual."

Don faltered. This was the moment he most of all had dreaded. Now he shrank from the final blow he felt he must deal.

"Please don't," he said, as briefly as he could. "Really, I'd rather you did not. It is time I began to look out for myself, to stand on my own feet; and it is my right to look out for my half-sister."

"You?" The question bit a little; but it was the involuntary, blameless snarl of an animal wounded to the death. "What can you do?"

"Anything that's honest," Don made sturdy answer; "anything, that is, that will support us." Then he went out and closed the door behind him.

And Stuart Rhodes, left to himself, lighted a fresh cigar. Then he felt in his breast pocket for a green-bordered railway folder.

Allison, meanwhile, with a heavy heart, had been arraying herself for her part in the gala pageants. By tacit consent between herself and Fordyce, it had been arranged that their whole little group should absent itself from the *pavane*. No one of them felt any courage for facing that gay scene, when two of their number, and one more who should have been counted among them: when those three good friends of theirs were in such heavy trouble. Early that morning, there had been a flurry of telephoning, and the matter had been settled. Don, however, had unsettled it, that afternoon, when he had gone to see Allison and had found her, not in cap and crinoline, but in her simple linen walking gown. A question had brought out the truth, a truth to which Don had made swift objection.

"Piease go on, just the same," he urged Allison, when she had finished offering explanation. "It would n't do us any good to have you stay away; in fact, it might do a whole lot of harm, stirring up talk and setting people to asking questions. Besides that," his blue eyes grew wistful; "for the sake of the old days and all the good times we've had together, I wish you'd go and represent the crowd. For our sakes, Allison."

And Allison had yielded, and, the matter of the evening once arranged, she had gone away to dress.

Later, though, when Gerrans came to fetch her, she

confessed to him how much the thought of dressing hurt her.

"But Don made such a point of it," she said at last; "insisted on doing the telephoning, even. Gerry, he's very brave. This must mean a good deal to him, as well as Bernon."

"With this great difference," Gerrans told her gravely; "Don only loses. Tremaine is going to gain."

Slowly Allison shook her head.

"It all depends on Hilda. Did you know they are to come here, to-night, to have it out together? Poor dear old Bernon! It will be a hard time for him."

But Gerrans would not be convinced.

"Not for him. He loses nothing; nothing new, that is. He has heard it all before."

"Yes, as a set of isolated facts, not as a connected record. That does make a difference, Gerry. Besides, he's not a man to take such things too easily. If you had been with him, last night —" Her voice trailed away into silence.

Gerrans broke it.

"Allison?" His voice always was persuasive. Now there was a separate caress in every syllable. "Is Tremaine going to —"

She interrupted him, speaking now quite steadily.

"Gerry," she said; "it's no use for me to pretend to misunderstand, no use for me to tell you half a truth. I love Bernon Tremaine; but it's not the kind of love you want, not the kind I would ever care to give you. I used to think it was; but now —"

And then Gerrans took her in his arms.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

DON gone, Tremaine dropped down once more before his desk, not to work, this time, but to sit there, his head in his hands, brooding over the chances of the coming talk with Hilda. What its results would be, try as he would, he could not forecast. It was like Hilda, he knew, to take the initiative, and to take it soon. Delays were not of her nature. Besides that, he also knew, conscience and common sense would assure her that, for them both, rest would be out of the question until, face to face, they had acknowledged the situation and agreed to make the best of it. But what would she deem the best to be? There lay the question.

If, all at once and without preface, the facts had been revealed to them, that winter day when they first had come together on the ice, Tremaine felt no manner of doubt that there would have been a minute of extreme embarrassment, a minute of question, and then a joyful acceptance of the fact, as making good certain lacks of which each of them had long been conscious as existing in his life. At the very start, they had liked each other; they had come to be good friends in an incredibly short space of time. Later, each had confessed to the other his sense of occasional loneliness, his longing for a completer family circle. If only the truth had been told them then, no harm would have been done. It was those later weeks together which had made the trouble.

At the start, their growing affection for each other had been wholly plastic; it was the mutual liking that springs up between young persons of similar tastes and habits and natures, but of opposing temperament. They met perpetually upon common ground; but they met, not walked along it side by side. Meeting, they brought fresh viewpoints, each to the other; they left the common ground together, each one the richer for the other's having crossed it. However, bit by bit, the angle between their paths was lessening.

After all, it was largely a question of the might-have-been. Accepted early, the knowledge of their common parentage would have been a delight to both. Early, their liking for each other, their enjoyment of each other could have been moulded by circumstances into a love of almost any type. That time had long gone by, however. Their affection, ignorant of modifying circumstances, had grown up along the conventional old path which stretches out before the love of man and maid. Before either of them fully realized what it was which had come upon them, they stood revealed to each other as lovers just ready for the last avowal. But the avowal had not come.

Instead of that, with one keen, cunning blow of Fate, Tremaine's love had been lopped away, and Hilda's had been left to seek its counterpart and not to find it. Tied down by promises wrung from him by appeals to his filial chivalry, promises contrary to all his sense of right and wrong, of honour, Tremaine had done his best to meet his crisis fairly. Bit by bit, he had done his very best to convey to Hilda Lynde that his affection was in no sense diminished, only that it had completely changed its nature; that he would always care

for her as he cared for no other woman, but that his very caring held no place for anything beyond. Meanwhile, sternly, harshly, he taught himself to think of her only as his sister, to forget that ever, in his ignorance, he had dreamed of making her his wife.

The struggle had wellnigh undermined his strength; it had shaken his whole moral nature to its bottom-most foundations. In the end, however, he had won out. It had been no mean victory for which he had been fighting, a victory of spirit over flesh. His love for Hilda, his hopes of what Hilda was destined to be to him: these things had clinched themselves into the very fabric of his life, had branded themselves upon the very tissues of his soul as they never could have done with a man less lonely, more expansive. All the dammed-in currents of his being had broken from their locks and swept him off upon the tide of Hilda's comprehension, of her whole sympathetic personality. And then, all at once, he had wakened to the knowledge that he must bestir himself, rebuild his locks, remove the rivets from the fabric of his life, the brand-marks from his soul. It all had been a hideous mistake.

Now, looking backward wearily, he realized all that the struggle had taken out of him. It had needed months to bring him to his present frame of mind, months; and he was a man, and of an iron will. And the months had taken from him something which the coming years never, never could make good. Hereafter, he would face life pluckily; but the old enthusiasm was for ever gone away. Months! And Hilda was a girl, infinitely less strong, infinitely less steady. And she had loved him with a fervour which had matched his own love for her, which had gone on grow-

ing, it seemed to him, for months since his was cut away. Now she had had just sixteen, no, seventeen hours to face the changed condition; and he had had more than as many weeks.

Before them was their destined interview. Tremaine shrank from the prospect. At its best, it would be painful; at its worst, intolerable. Without a thought of disloyalty to Hilda, Tremaine instinctively was bracing himself to face the worst: tears, protestations, even blame for lending himself to the deception. Indeed, he could not wonder much that Hilda should blame him. No one who had not been present at his talk with Stuart Rhodes, at his later talk with his cloistered mother, no one else ever could imagine all the pressure which had been brought to bear upon him, to force him to hold the ugly secret still inviolate. Perhaps he had been wrong to yield; but he was convinced it was a wrong against which no man could have held out. Anyway, he had yielded. So much was done, and irrevocable.

After the interview? His aching head clasped in his hands, he tried to face the matter with a clear grasp of what lay before him. There were two possible things which might happen. Rather, there was a possibility, and there was a probability. It was barely possible that a girl like Hilda, fearless, frank and honest to the core of her soul, would throw prudence to the winds, would brave all the tornado of gossip which would be bound to follow, and announce to the world at large that she and Tremaine were children of the dead Hôtel-Dieu nun. In that case, he could see her often, could have the right to love and guard her, even from the distance their unlike fortunes would always maintain be-

tween them. Sister or no, she was adopted child of a New York millionaire, he a mere civil engineer, hence forward relying solely on his earnings. Still, they could meet and, meeting, bit by bit he could teach her the lesson he himself had learned: that, granted the need, love can be transmuted from passion into brotherly affection.

The time had been, and not so very long ago, that the knowledge that his future intercourse with Hilda must lie only within those lines, would have caused him the most poignant anguish. Now, however, so strong on him had been the clutch of circumstance, it seemed to him those narrow lines held within them room for the fulfilment of the future's dearest hope. Nevertheless, all this was the merest possibility, a possibility which went against all worldly prudence. Besides, there was always Stuart Rhodes to be reckoned with. In a sense, the game was still within his hands. Would he allow Hilda to come forth and tell the truth, and then to go back and live upon the bounty of the man whose reputation she had helped to blast? That Hilda would of her own will resign her place in the Rhodes home, Tremaine dismissed as an impossibility. To be sure, Don had said that they would announce the truth; but Don was young, unpractical. He had no notion what the announcing might involve; no notion, either, of what the practical outcome of it all might be. Heroic appeal to headstrong, chivalrous youth. Their working consequences, in bread and haberdashery and theatre tickets, are quite another matter. It might be possible, as Don had said, that Hilda would give out the truth; but, in spite of Don, Tremaine judged the possibility to be a slight one.

The more probable outcome of the whole situation lay in a stormy interview of wailing and rebuke, a tacit acceptance of Tremaine as an unacknowledged sort of brother. and then —

Poor Hilda! Under all her gay surface of irresponsibility, she was emotional. And the upheaval must have been awful. Later on, she was bound to worry over it, to grieve. However, there was always Don. Later, Tremaine doubted not, there also would be Fordyce. Besides that, in the course of the coming years, age might teach her the practical, stodgy old lesson concerning half a loaf. For the present, though, he could not blame her if her love turned to a swift dislike, born of his assistance in maintaining the deception, born, too, of her broken self-esteem at finding him no possible object for —

A step came up the stairs, quick, firm. Tremaine lifted his head wearily. A caller of some sort, and on urgent business, to judge from the pace. However, his office hours were almost at an end; and, until now, his day had been mercifully free from interruptions. He would greet this late comer with the most cordial grace he could. He drew a sheaf of papers towards him, and picked up the nearest pen.

The step came on up the stairs, swifter, nearer, very light. Then it paused, and there was a tap upon the open door.

"Come in." And Tremaine, the freshly-inked pen in his hand, swung about to face the door.

There on the threshold stood, not the contractor whom he dreaded and expected, but a slim, lithe figure with a face almost as white as the crisp linen of her frock, a face shadowed and shaded by a wide black

hat whose drooping plumes quivered a little, as if in sympathy with the unsteady lips below. It was Hilda.

"Bernon!" she said, with a little, stifled cry.

The pen fell to the floor. Tremaine crunched it beneath his foot as he started from his chair.

"Hilda!" And the slow, low word held within it all his doubts and questions, all the measureless love he offered her, his sister, all his uncertainty of the manner of her accepting it.

Nevertheless, he took no step to meet her. He only stood waiting, ready, beside his chair.

"Bernon!" she said again. Then, swiftly crossing to his side, she flung her arms about his neck. "My dear old brother! The brother I have longed for, always and always! How could I have been so dull as not to understand!" And then, in a burst of passionate, unconquerable love, she turned on him with the sharp question, "Bernon, how could you ever dream I could be able to wait until to-night?"

A good two hours later, Don, missing Hilda and searching for her quite in vain, at last gave up the search and went to hunt up Tremaine, in order to acquaint him with the successful outcome of his errand at the Carharts'. Tremaine had not been to his room since the morning, his landlady announced; neither had he been seen, that day, inside his boarding-house. With sinking heart, Don headed for the office, too wearied by his discussion with his father to feel himself fitted to offer to Tremaine the comfort which he, brooding up there alone, would infallibly need. Don's world, just then, seemed to him exceedingly awry in every corner. None the less, he braced himself to take it as he found it, and do what he could to set it right. Hilda missing,

Tremaine should be his care. Quietly he went inside the building, quietly went up the stairs, steadying himself, as he mounted upward, for the task of renewed consolation that inevitably lay before him.

Half way up the last flight of stairs, however, a slight sound from above brought him to a sudden halt. There was talking above, a continuous low murmur. Two voices? Tremaine's, for one, and — Hilda's!

"But I have it all planned out, dear boy," Hilda was saying. "Of course, I can't go back to live with — him. You'll have to take me; you can't well help it. We'll live ever so simply. Really, I can get on with very little, Bernon; very, very little. And I know how to do things, too, some things. Besides, I have a little money of my own, saved out of my allowance. You'd rather that I did n't take it? Bernon," her breath caught sharply; "is your new sister going to be a burden on you, more of a burden than you ought to carry?"

Don, waiting silently upon the stairs, could only hear the accent of the answer, not the words. Then Hilda spoke again.

"Bernon, you are wonderfully good to me," she told him, with a sweet humility. "It is a great deal for you to take me into your care, like this. And I can only thank you by my perfect happiness."

This time, Don heard Tremaine's answer plainly.

"Are you happy, Hilda?"

Without a pause, she replied to him unflinchingly.

"Yes, Bernon, quite. I suppose you never will understand it all; but, after these last weeks when you seemed to be slipping away out of my life, it almost dazes me to know that you are really mine, really my own brother, a part of my own life. Last winter," her

voice lowered a little, grew more slow; "if this had come to me then, I might not have been so happy. Then I was full of — other dreams. Now, Bernon, it is all different. I thought I loved you then. I know I love you now. The old love, though, was half made up of plans about myself. The new one grew up out of it, when I came back here to find you looking ill and worried, when I came back to face the dread that, sooner or later, you were bound to go away entirely out of my life. And then —"

"And then, Hilda?" Tremaine urged her, after a little pause.

The answer came slowly, and so low that Don could but just overhear it.

"Then," and the words held a shudder; "then I was so wretched, Bernon, that I did not care very much what did happen. Something had come to change you, something I could not understand, something that made me love you more than ever, only in a different way, more unselfishly, perhaps, and very hopelessly. It was as if we both were fighting something invisible, fighting it and struggling to join hands across the darkness. And then, last night, I understood it all, everything!" Her voice throbbed, grew eager, happy. "And then I knew that you were mine, my brother, the brother I have always wished for, and that nothing could ever separate us any more."

A long pause followed. Hilda broke it.

"Bernon," she said slowly; "even now I can't believe that you are really my own, really my big brother. I have wanted a big brother, all my life. It's been a lonely life, too, Bernon, with all its froth and fun. Again and again, if it had n't been for dear old Don, I think I

should have — Bernon," she broke off abruptly; "have you ever known what it was to feel you must have some one of your own real family belonging to you, or else just die?"

There came a little silence. Then Don heard Tremaine make deliberate, happy answer, —

"I used to, Hilda. I never shall again; never any more."

And then Don realized that it was time he went away in search of Ethel.

THE END